Games / Anime / Multimedia

Golden Axe: Beast Rider Poster Inside! • Little Big Planet

play

Splatterhouse

We're gonna get bloody on this one!

Mushroom Men
Final Fantasy XIII
De Blob
Baja
Fatal Frame
Braid
Infinite Undiscovery
Huxley
Saints Row 2
Heavy Rain
Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia

October 2008

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The stories we tell

One of the upsides to dealing with the nasty stressors that come with Los Angeles living is being surrounded by all the creative energy that electrifies the spirit of the biggest dreamers in this town. When you think LA, you think movies, music, motley artist types from the packed venders in Venice to the beachside mansion hideaways in Malibu. Somewhere in between blossoms the wonderfully nondescript gaming scene.

You run into developers all over the place—especially at the pubs, where those long and stressful gamemaking days love to melt away. Inside, the drinks flow, and so do loose tongues ... but that's a story for another day.

The story of the month has been Braid. It's interesting to hear so many informed (and not so informed) opinions about a game that until recently was the tiniest of dots on most people's radars. Some call it pretentious, some call it inspiring, some call it a work of art, some call it a fun distraction that will come and go just as every other game does. That last one is probably mostly the truth, and so it goes.

I've rarely had such enjoyable conversations about a game, which have lead into conversations about life, which have lead into an agreement on both sides of the fence that the evocative existence of the game, take it or leave it, is something we so desperately need more of.

The idea of an indie game is gaining sharper, more substantial definition. The simplest reason for that is that XBLA and PSN define a space, afford a budget, establish certain boundaries—a fact that is both to be praised and scrutinized. A game like Braid is going to become more common and sought after, and our wonderful and clumsy industry is going to be pushed forward in unexpected ways. Braid is just the beginning, planting seeds right along side the Bionic Commandos and Geometry Wars and Castle Crashers. These games are made by tiny teams with modest budgets—Braid is somewhere in the range of $200K—and that passion, drive and uniformity of vision these projects afford simply can't be valued with a price tag. And it sure is nice feeling like you're sharing in a collective throwback to the formative years of gaming!

If you look at these downloadable games, one area of concern is the fact that a price tag is ultimately what provides the key to the prize, and the value of that prize is obtusely out of focus. There were hints that 10 bucks was a sweet spot, now we're creeping up to 15, WipEout HD—which is falling outside indie speak—is 20, and then you look at bight-sized triple-A Ratchet and Clank and its 15 dollars. Now we get into the debate of dollar-per-hour-per-creative-vision economy of scale talk that is bound to get dicey.

Ratchet and Clank was a surprise announcement and a very interesting test case. A series I have adored and found as one of the best games of last year left me a little cynical with this wobbly release. This is not an "indie" game, but it shares

"The idea of an indie game is gaining sharper, more substantial definition."

the space and possible expectations of what a downloadable game is supposed to be, which is ... what exactly? Are we about to start seeing companies routinely take their prized franchises and start dumping them off into unknown waters, where the hungriest of sharks are inevitably going to swim elsewhere if they start smelling stink? And these large-manned efforts better not start hogging the limelight and push the indie achievements into a little side closet in the XBLA and PSN homefront.

There are a lot of unknowns right now, but back to the original talk of the town: indie games are on the rise, and it's time we recognize a movement whose voice needs to be praised.

Brady Fiechter

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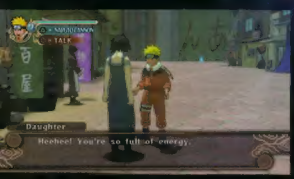

November, 2008

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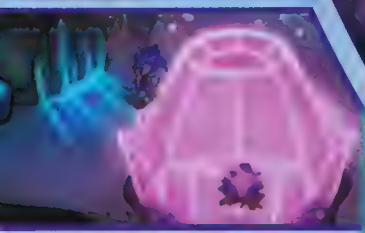

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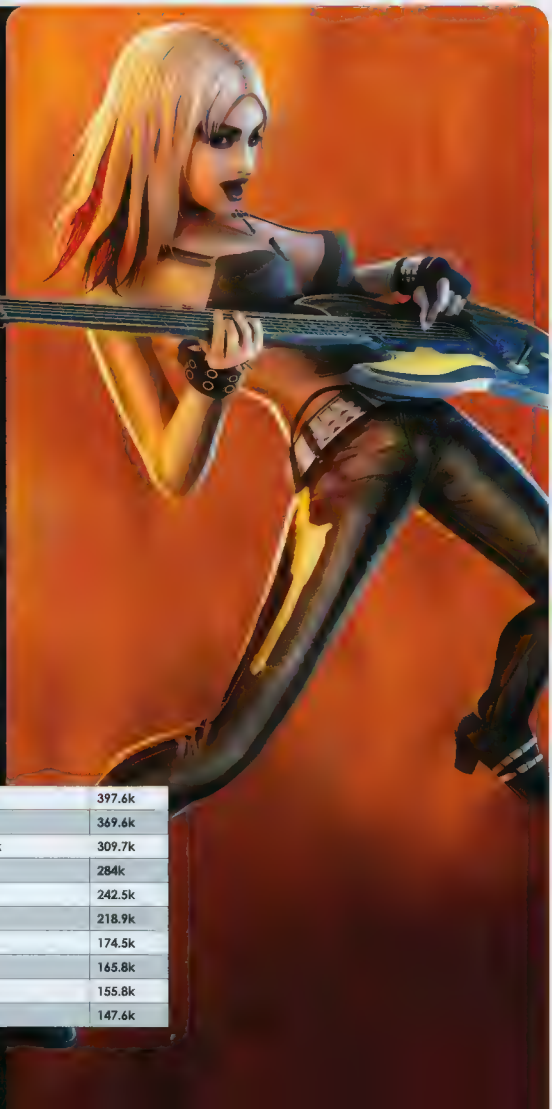

Battle of the Bands!

It's official! There are now more plastic guitars in America than the combined total of every "real" instrument (with the exception of the accordion of course) ever purchased*.

Games that ROCK! En masse

Total Guitar Hero CONSOLE Sales **16.82 million units**
NDS PORTABLE Guitar Hero: On Tour **733,000**
Total Rock Band Sales **3.3 million units**

State of the Industry

Look! Something G-Dub didn't break!

Video Game Hardware YTD July 07: 2.72Billion~July 08: 3.33 Billion **UP 22%**
Video Game Software YTD July 07: 3.31Billion~July 08: 4.9 Billion **UP 48%**
Video Game Accessories YTD July 07: 987.5M~July 08: 1.24 Billion **UP 26%**
Video Games (Ind. Overall) YTD July 07: 7.03 Billion~July 08: 9.47 Billion **UP 35%**

Hardware Sales July 2008

Okay! PS2 closing in on PSP and PS3... And the DS whups the Wii, and everything else!

1	PS3	224.9k
2	PSP	221.7k
3	PS2	155.5k
4	Xbox 360	204.8k
5	Wii	555k
6	Nintendo DS	608.4k

Top 10 Sales July 2008

1	NCAA Football 09	EA	Xbox 360	397.6k
2	Wii Fit w/balance board	Nintendo	Wii	369.6k
3	Guitar Hero on Tour	Activision	NDS 309.7k	309.7k
4	Wii Play w/remote	Nintendo	Wii	284k
5	NCAA Football 09	EA	PS3	242.5k
6	Soul Calibur IV	Namco Bandai	Xbox 360	218.9k
7	Mario Kart w/wheel	Nintendo	Wii	174.5k
8	Rock Band Special Edition Bundle	EA	Wii	165.8k
9	Soul Calibur IV	Namco Bandai	PS3	155.8k
10	Sid Meier's Civilization	Take2 Int.	Xbox 360	147.6k

Depicts number pulled from buttocks

ink

PSP Gets Hardware, Software Revisions

Why drop prices when you can do a hardware revision instead? That is the question the folks at Sony seem to have asked themselves, as they took a page from Apple's playbook and announced yet another update to their PlayStation Portable. The PSP-3000, as the new model is known, will be very similar to the current "slim" model (aka the PSP-2000), but with a few welcome changes. First up is a new screen that boasts a wider color range, richer contrast ratio, more vibrant colors, and better anti-glare technology. Along with that also comes a higher refresh rate–meaning the dreaded enemy of the PSP, screen ghosting, will hopefully be even more reduced over what it was in the PSP-2000

Along with a host of other smaller updates, two other big changes in store for the PSP-3000 are the inclusion of a built-in microphone–so now all you'll need for in-game voice chat or Skype usage is a regular pair of headphones–and support for outputting games to a television via a composite connection instead of just being limited to only component output as the PSP-2000 currently is. The PSP-3000 will debut in North America in Mystic Silver as part of the Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters bundle, followed by a Piano Black version both in the 4GB Memory Entertainment Pack and as a non-bundle core pack. Now, Sony, about a non-silkscreened Pearl White version...

However, that's not the only PSP news to hit recently. Just as we're finishing up this issue, word comes in of two big announcements from Sony about feature revisions coming later this year to go along with the new hardware. First up is the long-awaited ability to access the PlayStation Store directly from the PSP, meaning you'll be able to purchase and download PSP games digitally straight to your PSP instead of having to go through a PC or PS3 first. (Speaking of which, Sony Japan will soon be releasing every new first-party PSP title digitally as well as via UMD; let's home SCEA follows suit.)

The other new announcement is a whopper: PSP titles that typically would only support multiplayer locally will soon be playable over the internet by using your home PS3 as an in-between. Homebrew software to do such things has existed now for a while, but to have this support come officially from Sony is a wonderful new development. So far, the only title confirmed to work with this is Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G–which, seeing how well it's sold in Japan, that's not at all a surprise.

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"I would also argue that Resident Evil 5 is not a game of race, but of geography."

Go forth and slaughter

I've been thinking about writing ever since I read Heather Campbell's preview on Resident Evil 5. As a fan of the series, Play magazine and human beings in general, I thought I'd throw some thoughts your way and see what you think.

I started to hear some early opinions on RE5 concerning the issue of race. I kind of shook my head in disbelief, wondering why the gossipers and media folk continue to try and rattle society's cages; yet another one of those "here we go again..." moments (Columbine happens, Doom gets taken off the shelves, Episode 1 gets released, Jar Jar is apparently a racist character, etc.). It's the kind of news companies such as Fox like to show, appealing to the most mainstream of the mainstream with the attempt to start new tensions or reinvent old ones. And sure, I expected to see these "controversies" on mainstream TV, and probably in many of the corporate gaming magazines, but certainly not in a sophisticated magazine such as Play. I was wrong, but I know the issue could become more than just how I feel about it.

Allow me to play the devil's advocate for a second. Imagine a gamer reading your preview about Resident Evil 5 for the first time and not seeing any pictures of it. Is the game really about "a muscular white hero blasting through mobs of poor black villagers"? What if, upon reading, the same gamer sees something like "Chris Redfield once again gets to blast his way through hordes of zombies." Are we talking about the same game? Not at all. The difference is that of perspective: the former creates a tension that wasn't yet perceived in the mind of the reader, the latter offers a familiar re-creation of a journey that the gamer has probably experienced with one of the earlier titles. If you have to choose, why feed the hate fire? The minds of many are now associating the game with an unnecessary tension that may not have been there before. As a largely distributed publication, it begins with you to make the positive choice.

I would also argue that Resident Evil 5 is not a game of race, but of geography. The game takes place in Africa. What race of zombies were you expecting to see? Resident Evil 4 took place in Spain, and guess what? There were Spanish zombies. Let's take it back further: Resident Evil Zero through 3 took place in a fictional town in America. It should be noted, since we're talking race for the moment, that there were mostly white zombies there. And do I need to go over Code Veronica, Outbreak and Dead Aim? If you truly "get that the last game featured Spanish zombies, and no one batted an eye," then you wouldn't, and shouldn't have made that distinction with RE5 or any other of the titles. White, brown, black, green, purple... there's only as much of a difference as people allow there to be.

And as a side note, Resident Evil 5 also has absolutely nothing to do with the reference to historical colonization. If movies and videogames should no longer use a location that has a history of atrocity, then there will never be another videogame or movie set on any location on planet Earth ever again.

Maybe I'm making too much of this, but I just don't want to see Play magazine stoop to the levels of mainstream media. Videogames, including RE5, are about positive escapism, on the same level as any great novel or work of cinema. You at Play know this better than most. In writing this, it was solely my intention to provide feedback, not to cause strife. At the same time, I just wanted to help make sure a spark doesn't turn into a roaring fire. And yes, Heather, I too am dreaming of Street Fighter IV.

Here's to a better future,
Chris L.

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THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

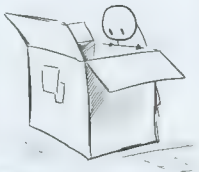
CRATES

Why ***was*** that clip of 40 high calibre, incendiary rounds in that gigantic, man-sized, sealed wooden box? Why were they the ***only*** thing in there? ***Who*** put that box inside that cave on the uncharted island in the first place? Tally the points. How absurdly generic is your game?

A unique container, constructed from common, contemporary materials, specifically formed for the safe storage and/or transport of the item found within.

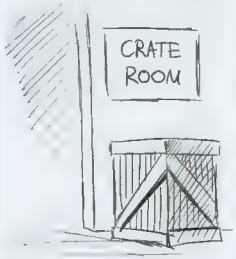
☐ **500pts**

A basic container, used repeatedly throughout a game to store any sized item. Though generally much, much larger than the single object held within, said container is stored in a logical location and is actually constructed from materials used in box manufacture this side of the 1950s.



☐ **100pts**

A generic wooden crate, the likes of which are only seen in this day and age during the closing scene to Raiders of the Lost Ark. Additional points will only be granted if crate is actually stored in a logical place.

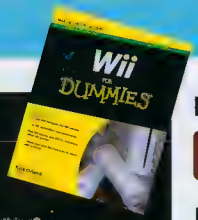


☐ **50pts**

A generic wooden crate that has somehow ended up in a location where man has yet to tread.

☐ **5pts**

Wii ain't no Dummy!



Writer Kyle Orland checks in to tell us that's he's pretty smart when it comes to the Wii; proof is in his book, Wii for Dummies.

Are you now a Wii expert?
I'd like to think so. I knew a lot before, but now I know way too much.
I see one of the bulletpoints is: ways to prevent damage to and from Wii remotes. Do people seriously get injuries from these damned motes?
Oh I'm sure you've seen the stuff on http://www.wiihaveaproblem.com.
The new wrist straps and remote sleeves have helped, but they're only as good as the people who use them.
If you're not a dummy, can you still enjoy this book?
It's targeted at newcomers to gaming, but I tried to include some interesting trivia, history and Easter eggs that gamers would find interesting. I learned quite a few things about the Wii just writing the thing, and I thought I was an expert beforehand.
This book is 336 pages. Will you be offended if I can't get through the whole thing?
Ha! It's not meant to be read like a novel. There are lots of pictures, lots of lists... it's not "Pride and Prejudice."
This is turning into one of those snarky interviews that are so great in the back of Time Magazine.
I love those interviews!
Is there something you yourself maybe were surprised to learn as you put the book together?
Let me think of a good example... Well, one totally odd thing I found... If you push up or down on the d-pad in the Photo Channel, you can blur out the portion of the picture you are pointing at. And pushing down distorts the soundtrack of Photo Channel videos as well. I have no idea why Nintendo put this feature in there but it's the kind of thing that's both fun to play with and hard to find on your own.

Criterion Plays on PlayStation

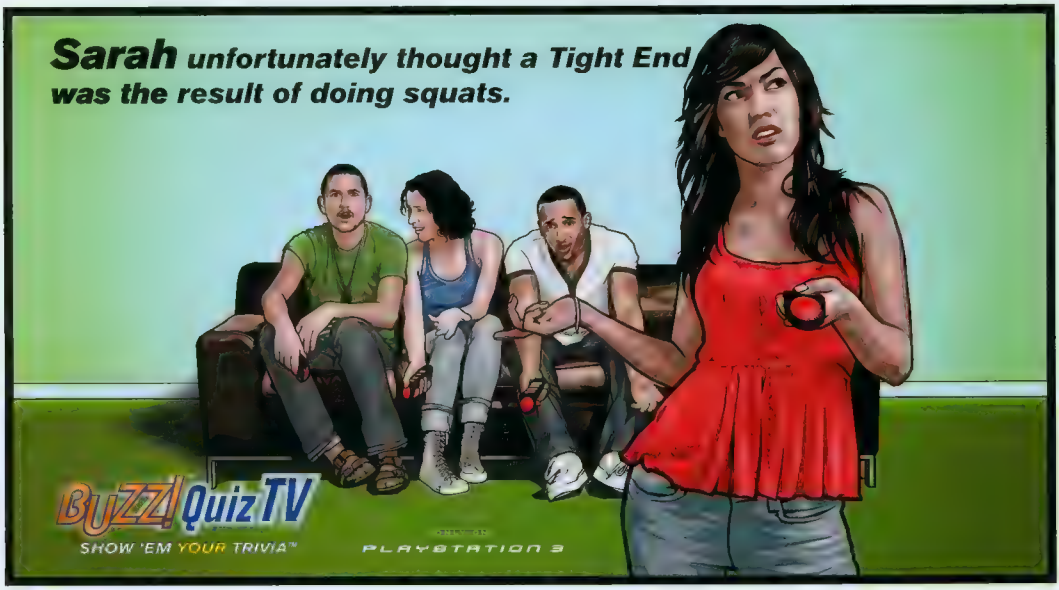
If you know movies, then you know Criterion, the company dedicated to restoring and releasing a wide array of films past and present. In a recent article in audio and video enthusiast magazine Sound & Vision, a visit to Criterion Collection to talk about their journey into the world of Blu-ray turned up a very interesting fact: the company's main Blu-ray player is none other than a PlayStation 3. It shouldn't come as any surprise, really; most in the know have long argued that the PS3 is far and away the best Blu-ray player money can buy, both due to the hardware's excellent video playback quality and for its extreme flexibility in supporting Blu-ray standards either in effect now or possibly to come. Or, maybe Criterion chose the PS3 mainly for its popularity: with the PS3 easily being the most-owned Blu-ray playback device, if you're going to test your new releases on any one player, it only makes sense to use the one in the most homes.

Microsoft: Vote or die

Company intertwines its Xbox 360 to the political process

For those inclined to take up the proud mantle of American citizenship and participate in the political process, but not leave the couch, Microsoft has the perfect solution: its Xbox 360 home video game console.

Recently, Microsoft forged an alliance with political activist group Rock the Vote. As part of this agreement, Microsoft will host political content on its Xbox 360 Live online gaming service. Subscribers to Xbox 360 Live will be able to register to vote via the service, participate in polls, and communicate with the candidates via an open forum hopefully free of the usual spew that passes for discourse on the service. In addition to the partnership with Rock the Vote, Microsoft has taken its act on the road with appearances at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Its dual purpose at the conventions, according to a Microsoft issued press release, was promoting the partnership with Rock the Vote and "educating delegates about creating a safer entertainment environment on Xbox 360 and Xbox Live using the built-in parental controls known as family settings."

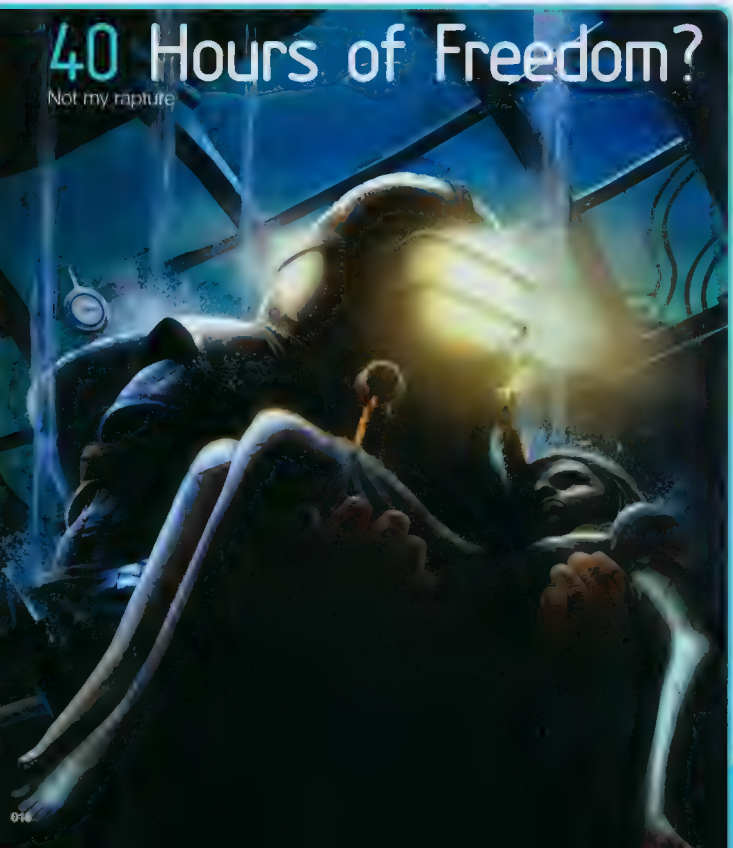


"I beat that game in well under 5 hours, yet it was right up there on my list of GOTY candidates."

words Brandon Justice

40 Hours of Freedom?

Not my rapture



Convention is a bit of a two-sided coin. Not that I've witnessed a plethora of single-sided monetary units, mind you, but the point is, for every annoying color-coded mansion door or random bout of breaking and entering in the name of coins, there are things like auto-saving, head shots and weaponized teleportation devices that have changed the way we play games for the better. That's why, when I really think about it, I can't help but get irked when I still see marketing pimping features that don't do the average gamer much good.

Adaptive AI, for example, is no more valuable than the scripting on which the routines are built, yet we still have countless games that claim to usher in a new era in artificial intelligence that still look like extras in a *Rambo* remake. Online play is only as compelling as the gameplay on which it's built, regardless of the game modes you cram in, but gamers still suffered from system shock when 2K Boston confirmed that Bioshock was single-player-only.

But why?

Honestly, it almost seems like we spend so much creative energy on ensuring that the wrapper is up to industry standards, often forgetting the package inside is oddly empty.

Take game length, for example. Do we ever stop to question whether or not one of the oldest, most common conventions in games only serves to exacerbate the issue?

For about as long as I can remember, the notion that 40 hours of gameplay is some sort of value-added panacea has loomed large over the point-by-point prerequisites, and as we consider the impact it has on overall game quality, I wonder when we'll exorcize this particular digital demon.

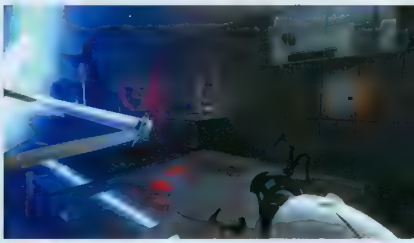
I know, I know. A whopping work-week of gameplay doesn't seem like an evil idea, but ultimately, every minute you spend in a virtual world is carefully crafted by a team of folks who work hard to make their game fun. Each day they spend improving their textures or placing power-ups is one less minute they spend on something else. Everything is a trade-off, so teams have to make sure that each decision gives consumers their money's worth. As such, many modern mechanics are either subtly or blatantly contrived to increase the amount of time you spend "grinding" towards the finish line.

The completist in you might cry foul, but the fact remains…it's a bit backward as an equation. We've gotten pretty good at piling on game modes or little totems to collect or achievements to unlock, but we still struggle when it comes to thinking of new, better ways to play. Even when we do, we're essentially building glorified tech demos on the time and money we're typically allotted.

Take Portal for instance. I beat that game in well under 5 hours, yet it was right up there on my list of GOTY candidates. I was shocked, amazed, amused and entertained by moments that only a delusional artificial intelligence and a slice of cake could conjure. I laughed, I cried, and like most of you I escaped absolutely *begging* for more.

Somehow, that seems better to me than the alternatives: Randomly spawned fights every 5 movement units. Enemy spawners that increase the odds until the AI feels challenging. Obscure puzzles that force you to try ridiculous strategies until you uncover the one path through a level that won't kill you. Games in which your own stubbornness is the primary motivating factor behind beating the game. It may sound crazy, but why can't we just make games that are enjoyable and leave it at that?

I mean, as much as I loved Dead Rising, I can't say the game's approach to enhancing difficulty added anything to the experience. And I know there's something "old-school" about dying and starting all over. Further, I get that the claustrophobia-fueled fighting needed a certain bit of random spawning, but between the save system and the fact that clearing a room did you absolutely no good, the game's considerably quirky story was often overshadowed



by this need to make things more difficult.

To what end? So that I wouldn't feel ripped off? So that I'd feel challenged? So that the feature list would have sufficient "street cred?" Come on. That game should have been about beating the f**k outta anything that moved with anything that wasn't nailed down. Instead it became a stress-fest centered around one's inability to approach problems in a logical fashion. I am absolutely convinced we can do better than that. Further, I'm absolutely certain I would have been far less annoyed with a finite number of zombies and as many save files as my hard drive could handle.

Frankly, it seems sad to me that we spend more time finding ways to make games longer, instead of being allowed to simply focus on making what is there better. It's why games like Mass Effect and Madden fail to hold my interest for very long, despite offering a wealth of content.

It's why games like Braid and The Last Guy are lighting up the scoreboards with reviewers and gamers alike. When you take a step back and look at the last two generations, you have to wonder: do we really need epic experiences to feel gratified, or in this case, can we deliver more with less?

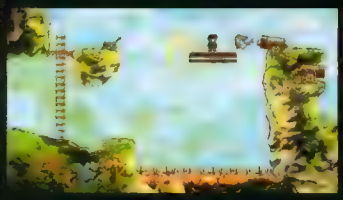
I mean, I get it…when I was a power glove-pimpin', fanzine printin' game geek with a weekly allowance of five whole American dollars, it was a herculean effort to squash the urge to rent and save up for a new game. Back then, a lengthy sit-down with nearly 3 months of my money had better last me a long time. But these days?

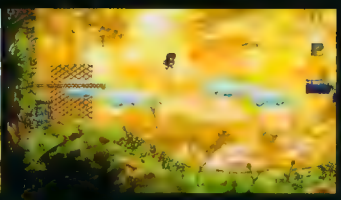
I'm just too busy, and after countless games driven by the same sad rule set, I'm just too bored. Further, given that $60 hours worth of movie would equate to roughly 10-12 hours of viewing these days, I can't help but wonder if it's time to reconsider what value is in this arena.

Would we rather see old-school technique and tendencies over and over and over and OVER again, or see something truly different? Something that pushes the envelope? Something that gives us hope for the next round of consoles? The more I think about it, I'd much rather finance that with my gaming dollars than yet another artificially extended experience. Considering the rut of familiar feature fandom we've currently contracted, let's hope the folks funding these things start to feel the same.

- Brandon Justice is working with some great folks to build a better bullet list over at Play Hard Sports, Inc. Feel free to send 40 hours worth of hate mail to bjustice@playhard.net.

System: XBLA **Developer:** Number None Inc. **Publisher:** Microsoft **Available:** Now





BRAID

Weaving a tale of passion

words Brady Fiechter

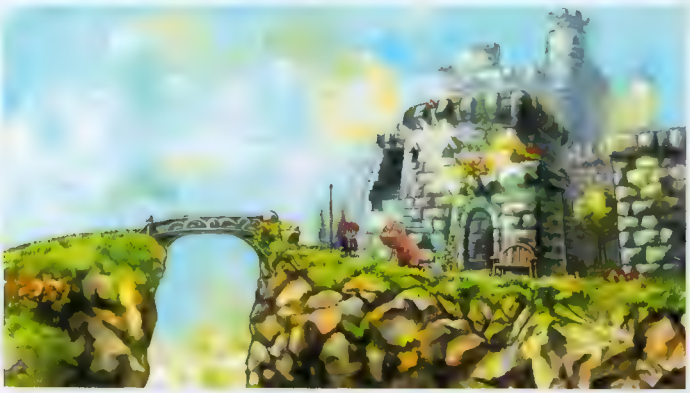
Some eager fans and critics alike are already calling Braid their preemptive game of the year. The truth is Braid is creative, beautiful, touching and something different. And damn is it a brain twister at times. Creator Jonathan Blow speaks now that his little indie masterwork is finally making the rounds on XBLA.

"The gameplay had to be good, it had to be the focus of everything."

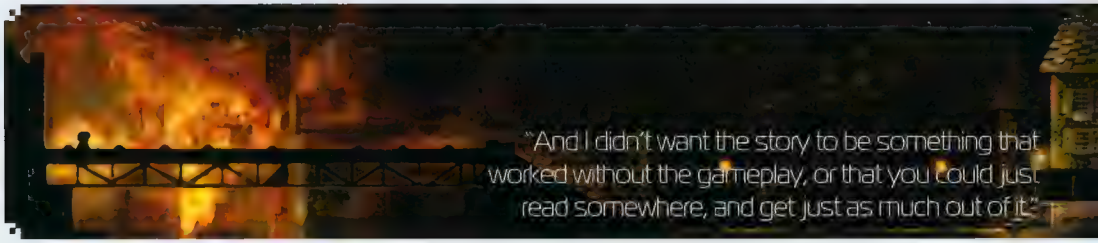
Jonathan Blow Lead Designer

The game is out, now that you can look at it without the perfectionistic pressure of being able to keep making changes, are you observing anything you wish you would have done differently?
I had a long to do list of all the things I wanted in the game before I was done, and there are definitely items on that list that didn't get done, but they're all really small. Things that just don't really matter. So I'm really happy about that. We nailed all the major things, some of them very late. We did some things in the last two weeks of development that are just crazy to do. As for things, should I have done them differently, or do I think there are any mistakes? It's unclear. There are a couple of things in the game that I really kind of wonder about, I think that maybe there could have been different approaches to it, but even after thinking about it for a while, observing how people have been playing the game, I really don't know if there's a better way to have done it.

I was just talking to a friend about this last night, how we found ourselves in quite a few conversations about life as we continued to bring Braid into the picture.
And we were struck by the fact that a game has never affected us in this way. But then we had to question, just how much of that conversation had to do with the parts that made Braid great as a game? Just how much were we taking threads away from the storytelling you provided? Do we discount gameplay too much when we get wrapped up in trying to provide that story strength? I love how you did weave to mediums together so instinctively, but are we getting too wrapped up in trying to tell a story in games?
I do think that. One of my main points I try to make when I give lectures and stuff like that, is just that games are perhaps a little too focused on story. If they're going to come into their own as a medium, they need to do things through gameplay. The way it is with a lot of these big games, the gameplay isn't that great but people keep playing because they want to see what happens to their characters or whatever. If we keep designing games like that, we're doomed to be a second-class medium. Now, with that said, when I sat down and designed Braid, definitely from day one the idea was that it was going to be kind of a game, kind of a book. That was the idea I wanted to pursue at the time. But because it is still a game, and not something printed on paper, I went about designing the narrative in a different way than you normally might. Or that you might often experience in a book. It's a little more nonlinear, but nonlinear isn't even the right word for it. Even though Braid was in large part about combining these story elements with these gameplay elements, there are several things I didn't want to do. I didn't want the game to be carried by the narrative parts. The gameplay had to be good, it had to be the focus of everything. And I didn't want the story to be something that worked without the gameplay, or that you could just read somewhere, and get just as much out of it. It was all something that was very carefully considered, and I went through many steps of design iterations when making the game.



I kind of have my own answers to this, but I'd like your take. My girlfriend has never touched a game and says she probably never will. She sees the violence and sexuality out of context and is turned off, which is fair. But she watched me play Braid, and was intrigued. I couldn't believe how invested she was wanting me to finally open that last world and conclude the story. She even helped me solve a puzzle!
You know, I've been playing games my whole life, I'm 36 now, I probably started when I was 7. That's a long time. Back when I was really young, I was perfectly content to play certain types of games, but I feel like at some point, we have to grow out of that. And I think that there are certain things that make us not grow out of that, like the way... We have this ever-advancing technology, so new generations of consoles or PCs come out where we are able to do kind of the same old games with better graphics, more realized worlds, but that by itself is able to catch the attention of people who have been playing games for a long time. It's a little bit new on the same old template, but at this point, even that isn't really enough for me anymore. I'm getting sick of those games. Part of it is the subject matter, part of it is that it's really not that interesting to be this super powerful barbarian guy who can kill everybody in the world with his sword. Whatever. Or the SWAT team guy who can shoot everybody awesomely. That's just boring


"And I didn't want the story to be something that worked without the gameplay, or that you could just read somewhere, and get just as much out of it."

to me now. But part of it isn't subject matter at all. Part of it is that if you play the same things forever, even if it was a very interesting subject, you've just had enough at some point. So what I tried to do with Braid was make the game I really wanted to play, something that goes in a direction games aren't usually going. It's abstract, I can't expect a lot of people would get the same things thematically out of games that I do that I meant to put in. It really leaves some free reign, people can have their own experience. But at the same time, regardless of what people do with the game, I think they at least feel that it's coming from a different direction. You don't even need to play it very long to notice that. The mood, the music, the way the graphics happen, looking at one of the levels, the way it's set up, the way the enemies are. Even if they eventually find it's just not the game for me, I don't really like platforming that much, or whatever, I think they can see it's trying something different.

Doing this game with such a tiny team, almost more like a partnership of sorts, I feel grateful that we're starting to see games like this come out of the download space that bring a purer form of craft and artistry in some ways. I really hope the success proves that people really do want this stuff. I do applaud you for that.

I appreciate that. And at the same time, the game really did take a lot of work. It took over three years to make. The challenge to me is, can I make a game in less time, maybe two years? Somehow maybe have an extra one or two people helping and not sacrifice any of that unity of the game. So that's something I'm going to be thinking about moving forward. You know, this game, there are many reasons why it's 2D, but one of them is so that I could eliminate technical roadblocks, make it as simple to create as possible. And it still took a very long time [laughs]. So you can imagine trying to do something more technically challenging than that. We'll see how it goes. There are a lot of open questions there about how can a small team of people, or one person, creating things that are that together, that harmonious, and do it in less than several years.

Then that begs the question. Braid is a critical success, people are saying great things about what you have accomplished, but to what end. Is it worth it?

Yeah, the game has sold better and the critical reception has been better than I could have realistically expected. So was it worth it? In terms of game development, absolutely. I can't think of anything else I would have rather made. Even from the first week, I had this idea and knew it would be the best game that I had made. But now that I've made this game, I'm kind of sitting back and saying, well now what? I have other ideas for games that I want to do, and they could be as good as Braid or a bit better, but I don't know if I want to do this again. I mean, I sort of am, I'm sort of starting out on the next game. But not in much earnest though, even though I think it's a cool idea. I think it's my personality, I find it hard to be satisfied with things. Especially external validation isn't very meaningful. I have all this critical reception and I'll be making money off the game and stuff, and that's great. But I just feel like I did a lot of work and am not getting much from it even though I'm getting all these other things. I don't know what to do about that. I don't know if that means I should do something else besides game design, or if I should change my attitude about what I expect, or if I need to resign myself to the fact that my life is going to be all work and no play

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Splatterhouse

They're gonna Rick your guts out

words Dave Halverson

RICK HEAL THYSELF:
You won't find any "health" in Splatterhouse. But there's plenty of meat walking around.

Of all the perks that come with being an "esteemed" member of the videogame press, the ones that commonly follow the obligatory "You are so lucky…" response I get when people find out what I do, are the ones I try hardest to avoid. I'm trade-show intolerant. I've never understood the party dynamic—leaving my home or office (which is where the games are) to drive somewhere (which means traffic, leading to stress and thereby shaving precious moments off my life) to voluntarily stuff myself into an over-capacity human sauna to talk to friends holding phones that I could be calling them on, if I wasn't waiting in a 20-minute line for the $4 water that will ultimately subject me to the sodden horror that is any public men's room. Plus, I don't like to fly. I'll get back on a plane when they get enough operating capital to fix the AC blowhole and spring for the 16-ounce plastic cups.

The job is my perk. I live and breathe videogames, period, and I feel more privileged to report on them with each passing year. The biggest perk for me has always been getting to know the people and the process behind the games, which, over the years, has led to a decent understanding of what it takes to make a great videogame. To go from that initial spark or idea to a compelling game world takes a level of teamwork few could understand. Getting a collective of creative minds all headed in the same direction, and all content in that direction, is a huge task. And that's just the beginning. The higher the level of expectation for a game, the higher the stakes; the more millions being pumped in, the more everyone has to gain or lose.

Game developers are a lot like professional athletes in that respect, if their seasons lasted two to five years. Time is their enemy. They leave one family to join another, and when life happens to one person, it affects everybody. It's a long process, where the results make all the difference. If the game's a hit, it's an indescribable high. The studio grows, coffers open and, best of all, the developers get to do it again—they can't wait to do it again. There's nothing quite as warm and fuzzy as job security. The true test, however, is learning how to roll with the punches (because they always come) and weather the storm.

It's really a matter of scale, though, contingent on budget, team size, the type of game being produced, sales projections and so on. There are different levels of success and failure, relative to the ever-changing marketplace. You don't get that palpable excitement at a game factory that's pumping out multiple 18- to 24-month licensed cross-platform titles, where a decent, bug-free, on-time game is a home run. Game development is at its most fascinating at opposite sides of the spectrum: Small, independent, tight-knit studios that would rather starve than sacrifice one iota of creative freedom, like The Behemoth and Treasure, on one side; and larger independent studios like BottleRocket, similarly tight-knit and resolute in their commitment to making great games their way (which is much easier said than done at this level), on the other. The vast majority of developers working on a publisher's dime will tell you that whatever direction they're taking is the right choice, unless it's painfully obvious that it's not—in which case it's always because it would have meant sacrificing some huge chunk of the game. And in the odd instance they do happen to let their guard down, such admissions will surely be stricken from the record. Just like the customer, the publisher is always right. When I ask if adding online gameplay takes away from the core single-player experience, or how it might affect a cross-platform game, if they would have done anything differently if the game didn't have to run on Wii or PS2, I know I'm going to get the stock (no) answer. The last thing they need is me spouting off on how the game would have been great if the publisher would have cut them some slack…

Driving down Carlsbad Boulevard at a blistering 30 miles per hour, passing cars like they were standing still, something was amiss. To my left, cozy little liquor stores, hole-in-the-wall diners packed with locals, surf shops and various small businesses lined the street, and on my right, the 20 or so junior high kids smart enough to ditch school and do something productive with their day were enjoying a decent two-to-three-foot swell. Had my automaton navigator suffered a glitch? Carlsbad, California—this is where they're making the world's bloodiest, goriest game?

Arriving at BottleRocket, which could easily be mistaken for a granola company, I knew before the dozen or so people who greeted me at the door shuffled into the conference room that this wasn't your typical studio—partly due to their doctrine of videogames being works of art, but more so because of how candid and relaxed everyone was. As the conversation segued into games past and present, for better or worse, and the state of the industry (which, in a room full of people who've been in the business for a decade or more looking at it from various points of view, has a way of getting pretty revealing), I soon realized that we were speaking freely. This is usually where PR or a producer from the publisher side jumps in with the "Okay, you guys, let's stick to the program." But the Namco Bandai guys were either engaged in the conversation or enjoying every juicy morsel. There was either no chaperone or they stuffed him or her in the closet.

And there we were, producers, directors, designers, writers and programmers all speaking their minds with no reservations, none more fascinating then BottleRocket president and CEO Jonathan "Jay" Beard. This is a man who's comfortable in his own skin. Jonathan is to game development what a Vietnam vet is to the military. He's been through it all; from his days at Ocean, where his barking orders were to make it in four months or they'd find someone who would (which explains Cool World), to his days as a producer at Sony, to founding BottleRocket and becoming a first-party Sony Studio with The Mark of Kri and the sequel, Rise of the Kasai, which is a story unto itself.

When BottleRocket became the odd man out as Sony transitioned from PS2 to PS3, they went from 90 to about 20 people, but they held fast until, finally, Konami approached them with Shaolin Showdown…provided they could deliver it start to finish in 12 months. That was the bridge that led to Splatterhouse, as you'll soon read, if I ever shut up.

Jonathan has had the kind of career that either breaks you—and I've seen my share of casualties, the fall from the top is a long way down—or makes you stronger. The difference? Ego. "I'm making games, man, it's all good!" Jonathan holds no grudges, has no animosity and zero baggage. The difference between success and failure at this level almost always comes down to leadership. Making a great game requires sacrifice, tireless dedication and patience, but most of all, it requires teamwork. Talking to the people at BottleRocket and Namco Bandai who are working on Splatterhouse, the only way to tell who's higher on the food chain is by their business cards, which is probably why less than half of them had any.

Splatterhouse could not be in better hands.

INTERVIEW>>

INTERVIEW

The men behind the man behind the mask: An interview with 6 convicted Splatterkillers

Dan Tower
Jonathan "Jay" Beard
Erik Medina
Tim Donley
Greg Uhler

play: Creating an epic action game that relies solely on great gameplay and artistic vision over the usual nonessentials is no easy task. What's the BottleRocket philosophy on what makes a great game, and how do you come together as a team to make it happen?
Jonathan Beard: At BottleRocket, we have a number of philosophies, rules and opinions on what makes a good game. First and foremost is to remember that we are creating "entertainment" and that everything we do should be in support of this. Each group within the company understands this simple rule and works towards it. Developing a game is all about creating an experience, something that will stay with the player and draw them back for more. If the experience is not entertaining, the player will put the controller down and walk away.
We also have steps that we follow to create a signature BottleRocket game. The average consumer sees dozens of games as screenshots, and we want to make sure that ours stand out from the crowd, so we spend time establishing a signature look and style for the game. We do not want to spend two years creating something that could be confused with another game or looks uninspired. We work with phenomenal talent who ensure that our games stand out from the crowd and sell a cohesive experience.
We believe in making playable games that are challenging yet beatable. If the consumer has just invested $60 in our game, we feel that he should be having fun with the game as quickly as possible. So to that end, we make the navigation and combat controls simple and intuitive. The depth and complexity within a game should not get in the way and encumber the player—he should be quickly immersed in fun and escalating challenges, beat the game and then want to play it again. We also firmly believe that it is our primary responsibility to make the player look and feel like the hero. We have a situation that we strive to create with all of our games, and that is to get someone to "snatch the controller from their buddy." One of those classic gaming experiences where your friend performs something amazing and you just have to give it a try. We create dynamic opportunities within the game and establish easy and appealing yet devastating attacks. Very quickly, if not immediately, we get the player to look like an expert at the game. The player should always looks like a badass—he paid good money for his game.

Has BottleRocket changed or evolved in any way since its days as a Sony studio?
JB: First of all, there are now more of us. Ten of the original 13 team members set up BR (although other team members have since joined us) and we are now around 90 and growing every day.

How did Splatterhouse find its way to sunny Carlsbad, California? Did Namco Bandai find you, or did you find them? How did you come together?
JB: BottleRocket was actually pitching an original IP to Namco Bandai—which they loved, by the way, and may one day see the light of day. They reacted very positively to certain gameplay mechanics that we were exploring and brought up SH. I played SH as a kid and immediately seized the opportunity to express my love for the original. We hugged, signed contracts in blood and sacrificed a chicken; next thing I know we were making Splatterhouse. Erik Medina and I have always wanted to make a horror game together, but we were gun-shy of survival horror since we felt that it had become a little overdone in recent years. SH is an action horror game, and we knew that we could capitalize on our combat experience and make something "bone-crushingly" special. Splatterhouse is what we like to think of as a reverse survival horror game—one where the monsters are trying to survive you!

The art leads on Splatterhouse are all (by game developer standards, anyway) nice, well-adjusted, decent people…one guy looked like he was getting ready to hit glass-off. Judging by the character designs, I expected a dark room full of pasty nards gnawing on raw meat. Take us through the creative process of developing gaming's most vile creatures.
Erik Medina: They fooled you, too. I'm lucky enough to work with some of the most disturbed and talented people in the industry. It's really just a case of setting the most vile stage for what we need and allowing the individual artist a chance to collaborate on building a world of creatures and horror that makes this game original and interesting. We've spent a lot of time looking at HP Lovecraft and horror films that take us to that place that we fear the most. All of our efforts have really struck a balance between the old Splatterhouse characters and a lot of new disturbing creatures.

"We do not want to spend two years creating something that could be confused with another game or looks uninspired." -Beard

All beating things to death and no play would make Rick a dull boy, so Bottlerocket built him a giant new playground.

While there's a built-in Splatterhouse audience of gamers who cut their teeth on 16-bit—we cook your meals, we haul your trash, we connect your calls, write your game reviews—there's a larger contingent of potential new fans who may have missed gaming's 2-D heyday all together. Have you considered doing for Splatterhouse what Capcom has for Bionic Commando with Rearmed, to stoke the fire?

Dan Tovar: We have actually discussed it many times. Rearmed is a really cool game, and we're sure Splatterhouse would be a good candidate for that type of treatment. Right now it's just talk, though, so we'll have to wait and see.

Not to beat a dead horse but...wait, this is a Splatterhouse feature—let's beat it some more—it seems like the ultimate way to reimagine a classic. It'd be a die-hard fan's next-gen 2-D dream come true, newbies would get a taste of the series' roots and how awesome 2-D can be, and everybody would make more money. After playing Rearmed—which outshines 90 percent of the atypical next-generation 3-D games—all we can think about is how insane a 2-D redux would be.

DT: I assure you that you're preaching to the choir on this one. We want to provide the best gaming experience we possibly can, and we were doing our best to provide the kind of content that fans of the original Splatterhouse games really want in our new game. Beyond that, there's not a lot we can say right now.

In any case, I know one thing: Splatterhouse is going to be Satan's gift to 3-D gaming. From what I've seen and played, it's everything I could hope for and more, mainly due to the fact that you're not weighing it down with a bunch of nonessential crap. This is a pure, raw, sticky, story-driven—driven insane—kill fest. Describe how the combat works and evolves throughout the game.

Tim Donley: The combat is so good because we are not afraid to focus on the fun. When we make a system, we play it, look at it and ask, "Is this fun?" If it is, we try to bring more of it into the game.

A recent example is the jump node combat. Every single person loves the idea of Rick leaping off walls and slamming into enemies on the ground. We are taking that concept and blowing it out with our navigation and bosses. When you see Rick leap through the air, haul his arm back and hammer a blow into a boss or wall, you'll know what I mean...and that's just one aspect of our combat! Every part gets that kind of attention.

I should probably mention that we have not forgotten what made us who we are. We are an animation- and art-driven studio with a president [Jay] and creative director [Erik] who have long histories as artists. We always spoke about bringing the combat to its next logical stage based off the original Kri and Kasai systems. We're talking about a system *designed* to make you feel like a badass wrecking machine. We want to make you look good and feel good when you play. We actually set up our battles with the intent to bring a cinematic experience to you.

From the first encounter to the last boss, we stage the fighting around the simple rule: You have to look good. We have gore and combat at the top of our lists as we make the game. From there it's easy to make the combat evolve using our system and still incorporate familiar touchstones players will instantly recognize.

Rick likes to jump around like a mad ape, too; besides wall sticking—so insanely cool—how much airborne traversing can we expect and how is it integrated?

TD: Wow, well certainly as much as we can get in! The wall sticking was an early idea of Jay's. We started talking about "monkey cage" gameplay and what we needed to do to make Rick able to traverse the world using his strength and agility, yet still seem like a superstrong, powerful guy. I mean, he is not Spider-Man.

In the game, Rick actually leaps up and punches his hand into the walls. That's what you'd expect, right? The guy will be able to gain a perch above the enemies in nearly every single combat situation where a wall is nearby. He will be able to leap up and hammer many of the large-scale bosses using the same system. Finally, one of the coolest aspects is, he is able to leap about, doing navigation from wall to wall using his wall punching. It looks immensely cool and that's entirely due to the incredible work from our animation team.

You told me, much to my delight, that you were intent on making the bloodiest, goriest game ever, and given that you are dealing with fictitious characters, there are really no boundaries. Can you elaborate on how you plan to become the first game in history to actually gross us out?

JB: No disrespect meant to other horror games, but I really feel that as an industry, we have let the genre down. I am a fan of horror movies, especially early Jackson, Raimi, Romero and Fulci. I like my horror to be wet and sticky. Our industry has made some pretty creepy horror games, but the gore has always been fairly lame. Sure, anyone can throw a bunch of red sprites at the floor and say, "Look at OUR gore. Gruesome, eh?" But to me it just looks like ketchup. Real blood sprays, drips and runs down walls. It pools and congeals, it soaks into clothing and drips from fingers. There is also a subtlety to gore that is lost in other "horror-themed" games. Not every attack should empty buckets of ketchup. Some hits should throw up a little spray or small drops of blood. Only by paying attention to this subtlety can you reward and satisfy the player with buckets of blood. Blood, however, is just part

...some fun. Rick rips enemies apart. To describe this to Namco Bandai, we used the analogy "wet paper bag full of guts." When Rick tears an enemy apart they will not simply explode, they will empty their contents onto the floor. We had some great gore meetings where we identified stuff for the game—blood, of course, but also guts that land with a wet impact, limbs pulled off like a turkey leg, the different colors that make up the fluids flying around the room. Fun times at BottleRocket. Our secret weapon in selling "gut-splashing" attacks and bone-breaking melee is our wonderfully talented animators and SFX crew, who lay awake at night thinking about how a 300-pound mass of muscle would curb-stomp a zombie clown.

The original series took place predominantly in Dr. West's mansion. Design-wise, how are you building it out into a big creepy horror set?
EM: The West mansion is a place where some gruesome and disturbing experiments have occurred. Some of those experiments have gone horrifically wrong, and there are signs of this everywhere. We are being influenced by the original game's mansion style, but are adding some history to the experiments that will date back very far in story and in style. This history will affect the architecture and technology in Dr. West's world. We're going to wrap this up with some good old-fashioned high-contrast lighting and blood, blood, blood. After all, it is Splatterhouse.

We talked about how the mansion actually plays a vital role in the game. Can you elaborate? I think it's time to reveal those portals you were telling me about...
DT: We see West Mansion as a character unto itself. It's the heart of the game. It is the titular "Splatterhouse." We've done some very interesting things with the mansion so that it never gets stale, since you spend so much time there. There is a sense of history and plenty of evidence of the horrors that have occurred there. It has been a lot of fun seeing the mansion being designed and the amount of planning and thought that goes into that. The team has done a great job of visualizing what West Mansion could be on the current generation of consoles.
When we were in preproduction, we decided that we wanted to be able to have the freedom to go beyond the mansion and open up new possibilities for more variety in our environments. This would allow us the opportunity to expand the gameplay and dream up some pretty nightmarish situations to put Rick through. The idea originally came from discussions about the machine in Lovecraft's story "From Beyond." Eventually, we came around to using portals, which fit our purposes well from a gameplay standpoint. Our portals are a little different that ones you might have seen before, though.

So we've got the mansion, a parallel dimension, and the mansion grounds where I saw the jaw-droppingly awesome—if you find the demo, please mail it back—Wickerman, the largest, most intricate monster I've seen in a game...and he's not even a boss. How much outdoor/forest gameplay is there and how does it differ from the indoor action?
TD: We have about 40 percent of our game outside. To differentiate these areas, we have characters so big they can only be found roaming the West Mansion grounds or other large environments. These areas have a lot of unique navigation and specific combat opportunities not found in any of the indoor areas. I'm not going to give it all away, but I can tell you we are going to let the player get first-hand experience of what a guy like Rick can do when he's let loose outside. There's a lot of room to [illegible] something if you know what I mean.

"No disrespect meant to other horror games, but I really feel that as an industry, we have let the genre down." -Brown

About those bosses, I saw only one, and began to tear up a little—glad it was dark in there. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it would seem that we're going to face off against massive unholy abominations in real-time pattern-based boss fights. Are all of the key battles pattern-based or are you mixing in environmental kills and quick-time events?

TD: Yes. All of the above. Ha ha!

Our goal is to give you an awesome experience. We want you to feel challenged but ultimately we want you to win. The bosses have a logic behind them, but the exact path to taking them down can be varied according to how the player feels. Rick can switch to Berserk (think of an amped-up Hulk) to deal heavy damage, he can reanimate zombie corpses to fight alongside him, and there are indeed environmental pickups for the player to use.

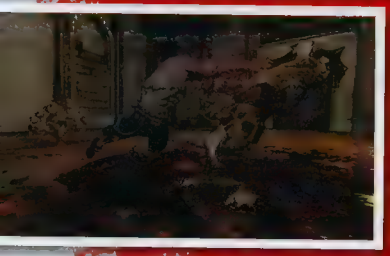
The bosses have specific weaknesses that will bring them down more quickly, but many times it's up to the player to use what he feels is best. We do have patterns for the player to find, as well as quick-time events interlaced with a lot of straight bare-knuckled brawling. Rick's not a subtle character, but we are not trying to be simple in the gameplay, either. We are going to give you many ways to express your inner demon of destruction. Believe it!

Splatterhouse has a pretty solid story. It's not exactly sophisticated—nothing was on 16-bit—but it provides a good catalyst to build on. How are you fleshing out the story?

Mark Brown: We wanted to use the original story as the foundation, yet update it and expand on it and tweak things a little bit. We want the experience to be like watching a really amazing horror movie, so like most good horror movies, we want to play with our audience's expectations and use those opportunities to scare the crap out of them. We have tremendous respect for what was accomplished with the minimalist storytelling in the original games. The concept of a normal, everyday Joe stumbling upon a secret world of horror and given the power to adapt and turn the tables on an army of bloodthirsty monsters is just an amazingly awesome starting point for a game. The originals referenced a lot of great genre films and there was a very Lovecraftian feel to it all. We loved those qualities, so we really wanted to preserve them for the new game. As we were moving through preproduction, we had established some really great characters and situations, but we were unsatisfied with our attempts at getting it all to gel in the overall story. We needed to find the right writer for the material.

We did a lot of research, read a lot of books and comics and had quite a few talks with some very talented writers. Then, one day, Jay brought a few graphic novels by writer Gordon Rennie to our attention. *Necronauts* and *Caballistics, Inc.* were two very different takes on Lovecraftian horror and they were both outstanding reads. It was obvious that Gordon was someone that could really make some significant contributions to our story. We called him up and talked about Splatterhouse and we really hit it off. Since he's signed on, he's been sewing all the parts together into a really smart and enthralling script. The work he's done on defining the characters and the world that surrounds them has helped us make more informed decisions during production and has helped to clarify the overall focus.

Another thing we really wanted to do with the story was to add some history into the world. Why are these monsters here? Where did they come from? What kinds of horrible things has Dr. West been doing in his mansion and why? Why does he want Jennifer? How does the Mask fit into all this? There were a lot of questions we wanted answers to. Even if we don't reveal them in the game, we



Looks rad doesn't it? Feels even better.
They can jump too.

wanted to have the answers established in order to know why everything happens the way it does. We have an overarching story that goes far beyond this one game, so there are beats we want to hit along the way to support that all the way through, even if the player doesn't fully realize it until the end.

Does it play out via in-engine cut-scenes or prerendered cinemas?
MB: We're using both. For the most part, these are done in-engine, but there are certain moments that we felt would be best represented with cinematics.

It's rare that we see an action game these days that isn't weighed down by extraneous features, such as online multiplayer and assorted death match and capture-the-flag clones that take away valuable time and budget from the core game. Either that or drivel like skill trees or overactive attribute systems. You know, stuff that looks pretty on a sell sheet but amounts to squat because the people who like that stuff are all playing games made to excel in those areas. Developers always say that the "extras" don't take away from the core game, but we all know they're not going to bite the hand that feeds them. The truth is, when you've got a finite budget and timetable every day and every dollar counts, you either put it all into creating a blistering single-player experience or sacrifice a certain measure of your core vision to appease the pencil pushers who think all restaurants should be Taco Bell. Am I right? So, how did you dodge the bullet? Was it an issue or is Namco Bandai just that plugged into the soul of gaming that it went without saying?
MB: I couldn't agree more. We've always had a clear vision of what this game should be. Adding too much emphasis on mechanics that were never in the original games could easily water down the core gameplay or change it into something else entirely. Nobody wants that. We wanted to add depth to what was already there and take things in a more contemporary direction. There are tweaks and changes, of course. The translation into 3-D demanded that, but the core is still there, front and center. We've been absolutely up-front about everything we've planned on doing with our executives. We said from the get-go that the only way to do this game justice was to go the full nine yards. Watering it down for a younger audience would not be true to the original game and would ultimately amount to a big waste of time and money. We know there will be some pretty clear expectations for a new Splatterhouse by the gaming community, and we intend to satisfy those expectations. When it comes down to it, we're just lucky to be working for such a savvy, forward-thinking group of people. Our executives have supported us from the very start and, like BottleRocket, Dan and I are immensely grateful for this opportunity!

Aside from the game's obvious metal edge, it seems like Splatterhouse is as much horror opus as it is a hard-driving actioner. Tell us about how the score mingles with the pacing and drives the action.
DT: The kind of action we have in this game really seems to go with metal like peanut butter goes with jelly, but we're making a horror game, and for that to feel right, there has to be the kind of atmosphere you can only get with an orchestral score. Our intent is to have a really effective "horror movie" score that is sort of punctuated by the heavy metal. It's an interesting mix and an interesting balancing act. Certain parts of the game need a more traditional score and others benefit from the mayhem of metal. Our composer is weaving it all together, and these two genres of music are really working well together. It's all about what emotions you trigger to enhance the player's experience and how to use the music to drive that process.

Are you scoring it in house? What about any licensed tracks? Not in-game but during the credits, perhaps? Come to think of it, isn't Rob Zombie pretty much doing for horror movies what you're doing for horror games? I'd wager that he'd be the perfect director to take Splatterhouse to the big screen, given that it's much more than just a guy with a chain saw or two-by-four. Do you know if Namco Bandai is considering the potential for life beyond the trilogy? Films, merchandise…McFarlane is doing Halo figures, which are about as exciting as a coin collection. No offense to Halo, but it's not exactly action figure territory. Splatterhouse is USDA prime toy fodder…
MB: The scoring is happening in Los Angeles by our composer, Howard Drossin. Howard is a rare breed that composes traditional scores for movies, TV and games, but comes from a heavy metal background. The man is multi-talented, to say the very least. We're having a great time working with him. As far as licensed tracks are concerned, we are working on something really special that I'm dying to talk about, but until all the paperwork is signed, I really shouldn't. There are some other tracks that we would like to license as well, but the majority of the music will come from Howard.
Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* was awesome. What a brutal movie! Splatterhouse would probably be right up his alley. There are a lot of really talented horror directors making names for themselves in the last few years…and believe me, we have been watching a LOT of horror movies! The prospect of a Splatterhouse movie seems like a natural to us. We would love to see our boy Rick up on the silver screen! Also, just for the record, we are very aware of a certain director that has made several heinous movies

"We've always had a clear vision of what the game should be." -Brown

"We have some pretty interesting ideas for some really cool swag that we'd love to have out there for the fans." –Brown

based on videogames, and we want to assure your readers that we know not to sign our baby away to him! We would love to see all sorts of Splatterhouse merchandise out there. We have some pretty interesting ideas for some really cool swag that we'd love to have out there for the fans. We'll keep talking about it and see what happens. If the fans demand it, it will happen!

I about wet myself when you mentioned the possibility of a Simon Bisley cover for the DVD case. The fact that you even uttered his name makes me know that Splatterhouse could not have found a better home, but actually putting Bisley art on a game case would be like…well, that's the kind of right thing to do for fans that American publishers *never* do. Developers often think along those lines and fans always pray for such things, but in the end we usually get some bogus hack art because Larry in sales has a bug up his butt—he sees "gamers" as numbers on a spreadsheet or representative of the 10 freeloaders who ate all the pizza at the latest focus test and told him they like fast food and *Iron Man*. What are the odds it will actually happen? Might Simon contribute in any other capacity?

MB: Very early on, when we were getting started with the guys at BottleRocket, we were all talking about potential art styles for the game. During our discussions, it turned out that we were all huge Simon Bisley fans! His art has this undeniable sense of power to it that seemed perfect for Splatterhouse. It's visceral and exaggerated and just plain badass. So Simon was obviously a huge inspiration for us from day one. We met up with him at Comic-Con in 2007 and commissioned a painting from him. He's a real rock star, that guy. Great sense of humor, too! It has been a great experience working with him. The fact that Simon Bisley is doing a painting of our main character has been very exciting for everyone. It turns us into gibbering fanboys every time we think about it. We still haven't decided how exactly his piece will be used, since it's not yet finished, but you can be sure we'll feature it prominently.

Speaking of focus groups, you mentioned that the loudest one in the room always influences the outcome, which was music to my ears. Not crappy pop music, either, but really good music like Alter Bridge, whose new disc Blackbird is available now on Universal Republic Records [as soon as you're done reading this awesome interview and ogling the many incredible screenshots and artwork, head over to myspace.com/alterbridge and make sure to click on "Ties That Bind"]. Because you guys not only get it, but you're doing it.

…s of developers and studios that get it done, …s why we get Superman movies in a Lobo world, *Dancing with the Stars* (my eyes are burning!) and 16 modern warfare games a year that all feature "realistic battles!" I propose that you seize the opportunity and market Splatterhouse as a game *not* determined by opinion polls but by highly skilled professionals who've spent their career making games, and containing no filler or by-products. There are a lot of new gamers out there and press who think that the absence of online gameplay is a bad thing. Bullshit in, bullshit out, ya know? A traditional FPS should have death match and capture the flag because that's what FPS players dig. But action games? Er, no. There's a question in there somewhere.

Craig Uhler: One of the [illegible] Splatterhouse has been the term "focus." What is the focus of the combat? The focus of the gore? Of the game? This mantra was established early in preproduction when we created a top 10 list of feature priorities for Splatterhouse. Number one on the list is fast-paced strategic combat. Number two is extreme gore and dismemberment. The list goes on…But the point is that every character, gameplay feature, environment, etc. proposed for the game was filtered against the feature priority list. Ideas that supported high-priority features were kept; ideas that did not were minimized or cut. This process ensured the focus of the game would remain throughout development. In fact, when we used these filters to evaluate our online component, even Namco Bandai agreed that online play was not central to our top priority features. Early on, it was decided to cut online and apply all of that time, energy and budget to [illegible] experience, the focus of the game.

And mentioned that you see online as more beneficial in the areas of replay value, through downloadable content such as new skins. In fact, you had a great perspective on replay value. Can you reiterate?

[illegible] content and replay value extend the experience for the gamer in a number of ways. For example, perhaps players will be able to purchase downloadable content to augment their core experience, as well as to extend the game through new modes and challenges. This content, in combination with the game's difficulty levels, would allow fans of the game to continue the Splatterhouse experience well after finishing the game. Of course, we're still working out our plan for downloadable content, but it's something we're paying close attention to, so that it represents a great [illegible]

When a developer has to create a game across four platforms, in which two pale in comparison to 360 and PS3, doesn't it have to affect the overall vision and design of the game? In other words, if Namco Bandai would have ordered Wii and PS2 versions—which they wouldn't because they're part of a rare fraternity that puts the customer first—but say they did; would we be looking at the same design? How might it be different?

DJU: We've been fortunate that from the outset Namco Bandai declared Splatterhouse to be an Xbox 360 and PS3 title only. Features of the game were maximized for these systems and content was specifically built for hardcore gamers. Had we built the game for less powerful systems, considerable time and effort would have been spent adapting the game's feature set to work on those systems and for a potentially different audience. Consider our core feature of damage and regeneration. Instead of using a traditional health bar, Rick receives massive physical wounds on his body, blood flows down his arms and drips on the floor, and bones, muscle and sinew regrow while he vanishes his foes—all to convey his present state of health. Rick is arguably the most complicated, visceral player character in gaming history. Implementing damage and [illegible]

[illegible] tual and gameplay elements of the game. Yeah, we're pretty happy designing Splatterhouse, knowing we have [illegible] of the Xbox 360 and PS3 [illegible]

I have a close developer/producer friend I've known for years, who, in my opinion, knew how to make games fun and sticky from minute one during the PlayStation/early PS2 era, better than pretty much anyone. I like to get his take on why so many big-budget games make such obvious and vital elements. I mean, if I knew, shouldn't they? He's always maintained that if you can't grab the player instantly with the way the character looks and feels and interacts with the world, then you've failed, and I couldn't agree more. That said, very few games manage it. The first time I took control of Rick, even in this early pre-alpha state, I got the feeling you have a similar doctrine. Is it safe to say that you agree?

DM: I agree [illegible] underestimate the word "feel." They confuse what looks good with what they visually see in the real world. In BottleRocket, we don't represent the real world, we represent a much better experience. That unknown experience is what makes our games feel good. The [illegible] ing people feel when playing a game is what they can't [illegible] that can be your worst enemy. The eyes are just in the way of what we, as game developers, are trying to get to. What your eyes see is what you expected or less than what you expected, we failed. We play games to [illegible] [illegible] and that's what [illegible]

Well, that's it for now. It was great meeting you all and creeping around BottleRocket. That new wing is going to be supercool. Get back to [illegible] Rick III! Take finance this!

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ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
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WAY ABOVE.
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"9 OUT OF 10"
OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
"4.5 OUT OF 5"
PLAYSTATION THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE
GAME CRITICS AWARD 08 WINNER
"Best Racing Game"
Best of E3 2008
PC DVD ROM
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BLACKROCK STUDIO
Disney

System: PS3 Developer: Media Molecule | Publisher: SCEA | Available: October

Big Dreams Little Planet

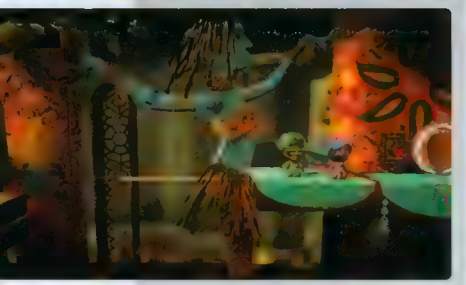
Media Molecule builds a delightful LittleBigPlanet for PlayStation 3

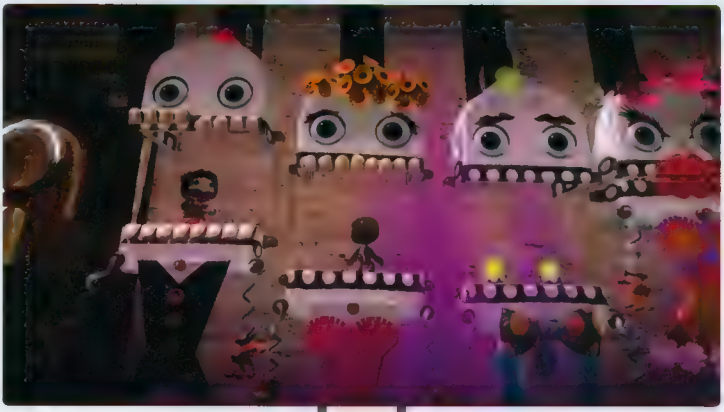
words Greg Orlando

Strange new worlds suck. Mars is, to quote rocker Elton John, cold as hell. The Planet of the Apes seems all too familiar, but might be fine if it weren't for all the human-enslaving apes.

In fact, humanity would have no hope for the future were it not for the shining beacon of LittleBigPlanet. Here is a world worth delving into: a delightful game-making simulation for the PlayStation 3 that allows players to explore their creative side, make their own adventures and share them with other right-seeking fellows.

To shed light on this brave new world, Play spoke with Pete Smith, Sony producer for the title.





play: What does the game's title signify? And why did you opt to run LittleBigPlanet together as one word?
Pete Smith: We spent a lot of time on the name; it was quite a difficult process as the game is so vast. How do you sum it up in a name? We went to naming agencies, people's friends and family, Sony execs, the lot, we even had an internal competition at one point, but in the end the name came from the team. We liked LittleBig as it was a contradiction and it was a bit quirky—just like the game, the planet was the more functional side of the game—everything takes place on a LittleBigPlanet.

Running the words together as one is a bit of a Sony thing: PlayStation, MotorStorm, it just seemed natural, and it's easy to Google.

LittleBigPlanet had as its working title "The Next Big Thing." Was this meant as hyperbole? Or statement of intent? Or something else entirely? Discuss.
We always had high expectations for the game, we knew from the start LittleBigPlanet was something a little different, although I don't think anyone expected the game to be quite as big as what it's becoming.

I hope LittleBigPlanet is the next big thing, but for now we're heads down finishing the game. The big challenge is going to be to see what gamers think when they get their hands on it. Will they make amazing levels? Will they like the single player experience? Will children like the game? We think the answer is yes, but only time will tell.

We fully intend to create a genre-bending adventure featuring the enigmatic Professor Meathelmet and his equally mysterious Meathelmet Agenda. Just how would we go about this, say, using LittleBigPlanet?
The first thing you need to do is plan what structure your level is going to have, is it going to have a story—in which case, you'll need to add a character at the start, give him a mouth and add some text to tell the player what the challenge is. Next you'll need to think about setting. There are a number of themes on the Blu-ray. Each comes with a background—you'll need to pick one of those. Then it's on to construction. If you've gone for a more traditional platformer, then you'll be adding platforms, cogs, sliding doors, etc. If you want to do a minigame, you'll need to think more about the mechanics, but it sounds like you want to do a platformer. We've found most people like to evolve levels—they build a small section, then start adding challenges to make it harder. For example, you might add a burning pit and a rope swing, but then you might extend the pit and add a sliding platform that you need to jump on from the rope, then you extend it more and add a spinning cog that throws you the rest of the way across. I'm sure you get the picture.

I guess given your story, you'll want an end-of-level boss. This is no problem—you'll add some AI, eyes, movement and you need to give him some brains. You'll need to destroy all of these to get past him.

Once your level is functionally complete, you'll need to decorate it with stickers or EyeToy pictures of yourself, and you'll need to add a high-score table, spawn points, and you might want to add a start/finish line to make one section a race against the clock.

Finally, you'll need to add rewards—you need some giveaways for completing the level, but you should also place some rewards in difficult places to challenge the player. The better the reward, the more likely people are to tell their friends about your level, you should also add some point bubbles so people can compete for the best high score.

For those creatively challenged or artistically handcuffed, how easy is LittleBigPlanet to use?
Really easy—this was essential to us during development. We knew that if we made [creation] difficult, we would not have the mainstream appeal we wanted. The designers have spent a lot of time making sure the complexity of the game is in layers, so casual users are not bombarded with the more technical aspects of the game, while the more hardcore can still create complex levels.

We also have lots of tutorials in the game. These are all movie-driven and have voice-over, so there isn't lots of text, and each has an example you have to make to show you've got it. During the user tests we've done and the beta trials, we found gamers have got to grips with the tools pretty quickly, and although you can't build a masterpiece in five minutes, you can certainly start making gameplay in that time.

It's genuinely rare that a game hits on a mascot or central character that's immediately iconic. Tell us about the creation of the Sackboy.
Sackboy took a lot of design and iteration; the character guys at Media Molecule are brilliant. They had a good idea of what they wanted at the start, but were also open to discussion and considered the needs of the game, not just what looked good.

The word "delightful" comes up.

PlayStation has never really had an iconic character—this may be because PlayStation is not about one brand, it's about many. With our Kratos [from God of War] and Nariko [Heavenly Sword] Sackboy/girl, we think Sackboy can become that mascot.

Sackboy also needs to be a bit of a blank canvas that you can customize to make him your own. There are masses of costumes in the game, and more will come as downloadable content. We hope gamers feel they can make their Sackboy unique, and with the emoting in the game we hope they feel they can express themselves online as well as truly represent their personality.

Tell us everything about the single-player component. Is it a tutorial or an adventure mode?
The single player is the most underrated area of the game, in my opinion. People are talking about multiplayer and the creation mode, but the single player often gets skipped over. I think people are going to be pleasantly surprised when they get the game. The single-player experience is over 50 levels, including minigames and mini-levels—there's loads of variety and some of the levels are extremely challenging. Also there's lots of replayability: Complete the level, you get rewards (costume parts, objects stickers, materials, music backgrounds); complete it without losing a life, you get more; get 100 percent of the collectibles in the level, you get more. We also have sticker switches that hide collectibles and can only be opened with the right sticker, which you may

"The majority of the surprises are still to come when we see what gamers come up with themselves."

only find later in the game.

Can you describe the neatest game or level someone at Media Molecule has created with LittleBigPlanet? Omit no earthly detail.
The neatest level is the final one; the end-of-game boss is amazing, but I'm going to have to omit every detail as we're under strict instructions to keep it under wraps.

One I can talk about is one of the minigames in the temples, it's a really hard traditional platformer. We made it a minigame as we didn't want people worrying about collecting things—staying alive is hard enough! It's against the clock and I would be very surprised if anyone completed it without dying on their first attempt. It's easy to assume the game is easy based on the first few levels, but let me assure you, that changes as you get into the game.

There's also a level that is constantly expanding and contracting—yes, the whole level—you have to jump though games as it expands, then get to a safe space when it contracts. The designer is a genius—he also did the end-of-game boss. We say gamers can do everything they see in the game, and while that's true and the tools are there, I challenge anyone to build something like this. If they do, they should send me their résumé.

Just how customizable are the levels? Will players be able to implement any sort of EyeToy or Sixaxis or mouse functionality into the user-created games?
Everything is completely customizable. We've focused on platform levels and minigames, but we expect people will do all kinds of weird and wonderful things when they get their hands on LittleBigPlanet. One of the designers built a Pong-style game during a mash-up session—or should I say a table-tennis-style game that used moving paddles. Obviously, we didn't put it on the Blu-ray, but it was a real eye-opener for me to see just how flexible the tools are when you think outside of the box.

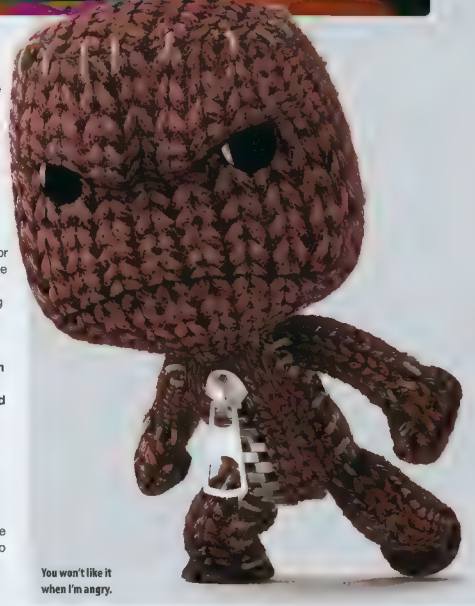
Will it be possible to import materials into the game? If so, how is it handled?
The only thing you can import into the game is EyeToy pictures. We did this for lots of reason—storage size, legal issues, etc.—but mainly we did it because we felt it wasn't needed. There's so much the player can do with the materials, stickers, functions and objects already in the game, I don't think people will be short of creative material.

Can players warp or otherwise alter features in the game, such as character speed, object physics, kinetic friction, gravity, etc.?
They can't affect Sackboy's physical skills such as speed and jump height directly; however, they absolutely can indirectly, using the game's physics. If you want Sackboy to jump high, put in a windmill and have Sackboy grab it and fling himself into the air. If this isn't high enough, add some helium balloons he can grab. The physics of objects is completely tweakable with our appropriately named "Tweak" function. A simple piece of elastic can be tweaked in strength and length, a more complex spinning pivot has direction, speed, strength, tension, timing, etc.

With downloadable content playing an ever more important role in the game industry, is there any pressure to withhold content and to either save some for the downloadable package or to make some stuff only available via purchase?
The pressure was the reverse. We wanted to get the maximum amount of content into the game that we could. Like all games, things have not made it into the final release and these could come along later as downloadable content, but it wasn't intentional. LittleBigPlanet has masses of potential for downloadable content. I'm sure we'll announce some soon, but for now we're fully focused on getting the Blu-ray complete and hopefully delivering something that matches the huge expectation we've generated with the current content

Fans want the ability to do almost everything with game-creation tools. As developers, you have to avoid making the LittleBigPlanet overcomplicated or perhaps too imposing. How do you balance these factors?
The tools at their deepest level have to be complicated; you can't do the levels we have on the Blu-ray without a certain amount of complexity. The challenge was to build a layered system that held all the complexity needed but didn't throw them in the players' faces when they first picked up the tools. The Tweak button is a great example of this: If you want to build a windmill, then build your base, add sails, and then put a rotating pivot in the middle. The sails will turn and you'll be able to grab them, if they're made of a grab-able material. However, if you want to make them spin fast in one direction, then back in the other, you'll need to Tweak the pivot joint. You'll also have to think about the tension when Sackboy grabs them: Do you want them to lag a bit under the strain then fling Sackboy with momentum, or just spin at a constant speed regardless? Everything is possible, it just depends what you want to get out of it.

In what way has your game surprised you?
I'm honestly surprised by how well the gaming community has taken to the game. As I said earlier, we always knew LittleBigPlanet was special, and from day one the team has tried to do things in a different way. What's surprising to me is that everyone seems to "get it." People are very open to the new ideas we're putting forward, and seem to be really embracing the "play, create, share" ethos of LittleBigPlanet.



You won't like it when I'm angry.

I think the majority of the surprises are still to come when we see the amazing things gamers come up with themselves. I'm sure there will be levels where the designers go, "How the hell have they done that! That's not what we intended that to be used for!"

Do you think we missed anything? Or is there anything you'd care to add?
We didn't talk much about multiplayer, I've mentioned that the single-player game is great fun, but when you add another three people—either on your own PlayStation 3 or online, it transforms the game, especially when people start slapping each other! Lives are shared and sometimes it's hard to resist giving someone a slap when they're standing next to a fire pit.

I say do it. It's only a game.

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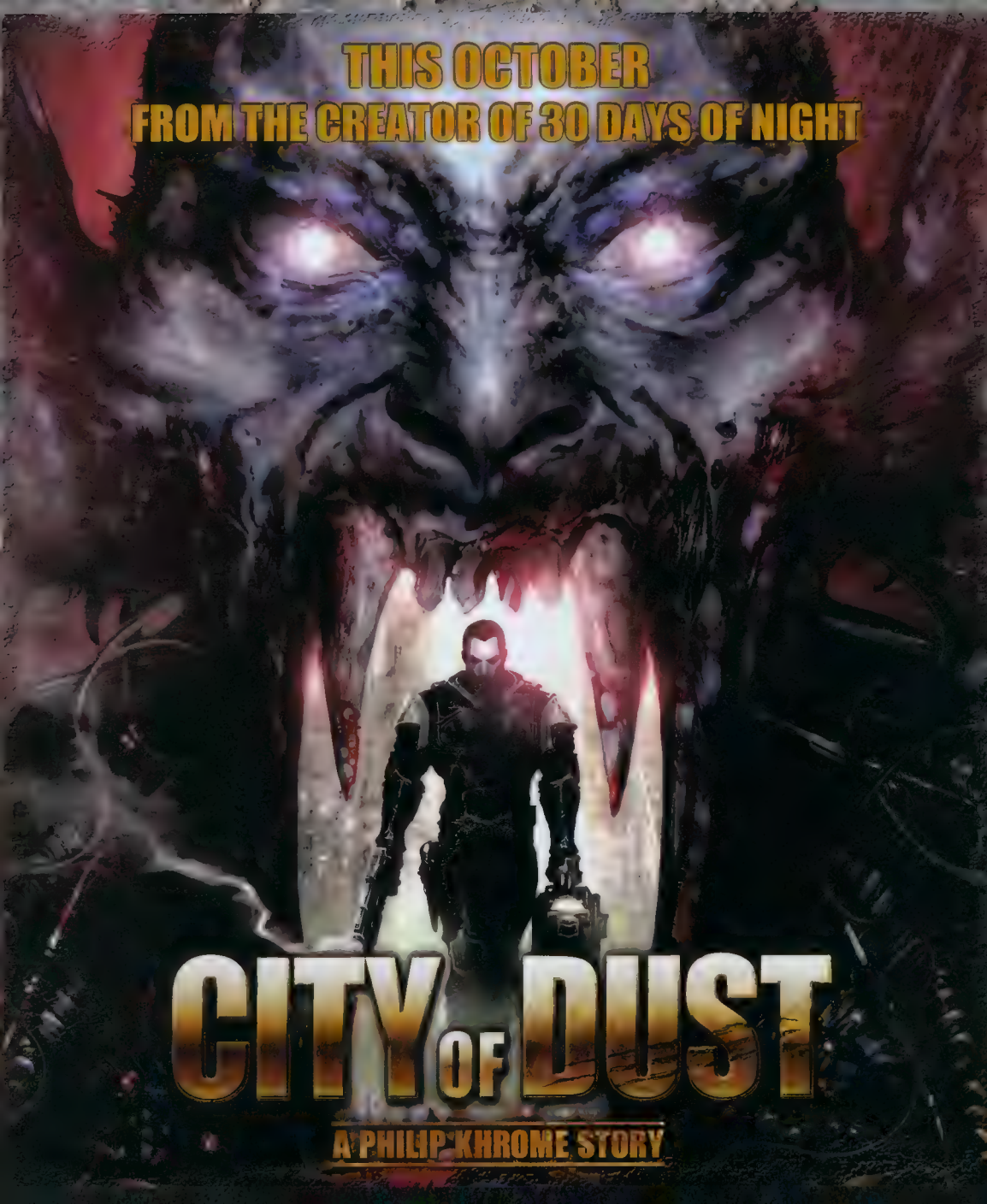
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Fatal Frame
Mask of the Lunar Eclipse

So scary that its own publisher dares not speak its name

words Casey Loe

When we called Tecmo to inquire about the U.S. version of their newest Fatal Frame title, they told us to talk to Nintendo, who would be publishing the title here. When we asked Nintendo, they denied having anything to do with the game, and told us to talk to Tecmo. Sigh. If you need any further proof that North American Wii publishers don't take the hardcore market seriously, witness a pair of them playing hot potato with what could have been one of the most exciting titles in the platform's anemic 2008 lineup.

Perhaps they lost interest in Fatal Frame IV when the title didn't turn out to as perfect a fit for the Wii as they had originally hoped. A game in which you're constantly aiming a flashlight and camera seemed ideal for a platform with pointer controls, but for some reason it didn't work out that way. Instead of using a Metroid Prime-style pointer, you aim your ghost-busting camera and flashlight with the Wiimote gyro, tilting it up and down for vertical movement, and rotating it right and left for horizontal movement. Yes, that's right—to look left or right you have to rotate the Wiimote as if turning a door knob. It's every bit as nonintuitive and imprecise as it sounds, and will leave you wishing for the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3's dual analog sticks. That's probably not the reaction the developers were hoping for when they decided to make a Wii exclusive.

But eventually you will get used to the controls, and when you do, you'll find a great game waiting. Fatal Frame has impeccable production values, with the most impressive graphics yet seen in the series and exceptionally creepy sound work. The environments are rich in detail, the characters look great, and the new free-camera, over-the-shoulder perspective makes the game feel more real and eliminates the disorientation from the constant perspective switches in past installments. (Unfortunately, the heroines of this installment move more slowly than ever, and seem to be openly taunting you by coupling overblown running animations with only the tiniest increase in speed.)

As veterans of the series know, Fatal Frame is easily the scariest horror franchise in gaming, and Mask of the Lunar Eclipse waves that banner with pride. Ghosts manage to pop out and scare the crap out of you even when you're totally expecting them to do so, and the game builds suspense with its plodding pace, forcing you to hold down the button as you slowly reach for each item, constantly wondering if this will be the time that something grabs for your hand. The horror works on just about every level in which games can be scary: There's the shock scares of a dismembered spirit suddenly appearing in the pane of a window you've passed a dozen times before, the eerie unease of seeing the reflection of your face hazed in a mirror, and secrets. There isn't so much of the oh-my-God-i-hope-I-don't-die variety, as Fatal Frame is fairly easy at the default difficulty setting. But that's fine with me—especially with the clumsy controls. Mask of the Lunar Eclipse works far better as a story-driven adventure than it does as an action game.

The game tells the tale of five girls who were abducted and taken to a small island as children but have no memory of the incident. Now two of those girls have been found dead, their hands clutching their eyes in horror, and the other three have resolved to return to the island and figure out exactly what happened. (Naturally they'll split up immediately, because that's just what you do in such situations.) I have yet to see if the story comes to a satisfying conclusion—something horror games tend not to excel at—but it's certainly intriguing so far.

It's a shame that Nintendo and Tecmo can't get their act together on this one, because Fatal Frame: Mask of the Lunar Eclipse deserves a high-profile release. Its control scheme may not be much of a testament to the grace of the Wiimote, but its shift to a new platform and (presumably) a new publisher represents a good opportunity to get new players into this perpetually overlooked series. We're confident it will be seeing a North American release sooner or later—if games like Escape From Bug Island and Furu Furu Park are worthy of an English localization, there's no way this is getting left behind.

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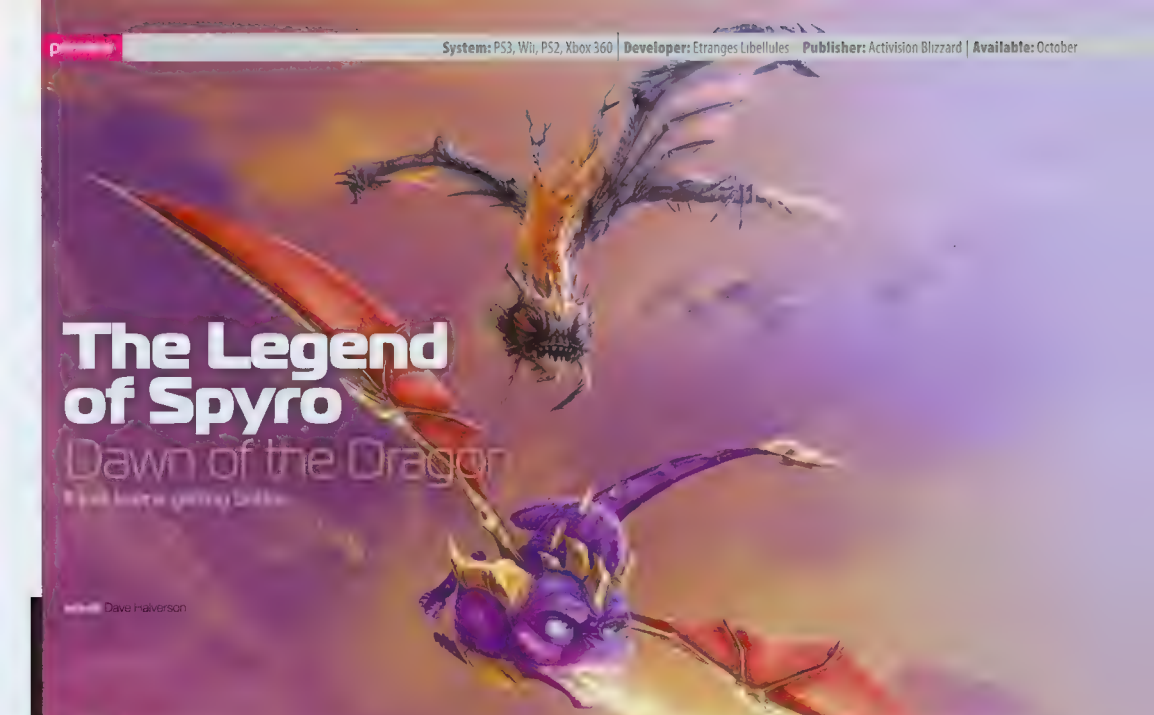
The Legend of Spyro

Dawn of the Dragon



Words: Dave Halverson

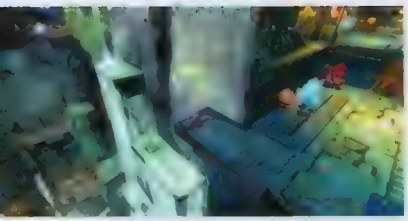
The bigger gaming gets, the fewer company coffers can take the strain resulting in more and more mergers, and nobody does it better (or as often) than the game industry. It won't be long until three or four giant third-party publishers rule the roost with everybody else existing on the fringe (but what a wonderful fringe it will be). The latest union comes by way of Activision absorbing Sierra Games, uprooting Spyro (and Crash) for the second time. I can understand Activision passing on Ghostbusters (they're flush with movie games) and they've always been allergic to heroines, so somebody else will be getting WET, but I figured Brutal Legend was a dead ringer with the potential Jack Black/Guitar Hero connection (and it being the greatest game in the world and all). I guess maybe they figured Eddie Riggs would trash Guitar Hero's hotel room. But Crash and Spyro don't exactly gel either. Activision hasn't been hot on character action games outside of movie fare for the kids since Tai Fu. Shouldn't these games be on an endangered species list with Sonic?

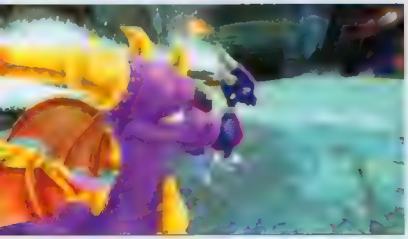
Dawn of the Dragon's press materials (and this proves I read them) introduce the series' first cooperative character, Cynder, as a strong female lead exclaiming that "girl gamers will have something to get excited about!" which loosely translated usually means "we had the developer dumb this sucker down to the point a Ferret could play it." Either I was in for a rude awakening, or we've finally reached the point where there are enough female gamers that the likes of Activision are taking notice. Before you go Googling "female gamers" (although I did find Gametart's survey fascinating, which states that "chicks who game get more lovin' than those who don't"), take my word for it, the softer side of humanity is now a multi-billion-dollar sector of the gaming market. Yay! So ladies and gentlemen, I give you The Legend of Spyro: Dawn of the Dragon—the best game in the series thus far.

Over the course of the first two games we've seen Cynder go from Spyro's mortal enemy to his closest ally. Even though she was born from the same brood as Spyro, her checkered past as a pawn in the service of the Dark Master still haunts her even after the events of The Eternal Night when she turned on the Ape King and ultimately delivered Spyro from evil. As Dawn of the Dragon begins we find them bound by the neck, tethered together, co-op style.

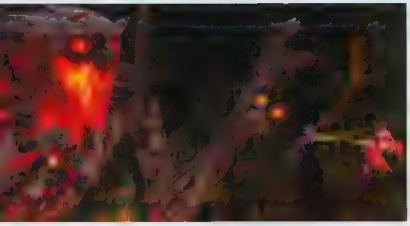
Playing solo you can switch between the two dragons, utilizing their individual skills as needed with the AI tagging along nicely as dragon number 2. Playing co-op, however, you'll need to work together to survive. Etranges Libellules

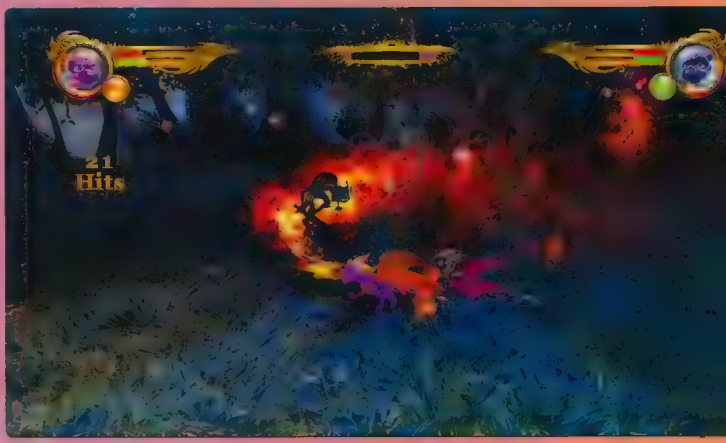
"Etranges Libellules take the Spyro dynamic to soaring new heights in their series debut, introducing free-flying open-world gameplay..."





take the Spyro dynamic to soaring new heights in their series debut, introducing free-flying open-world gameplay (the crowd goes wild!) and then tethering you to another dragon (the crowd goes eerily silent). The whole idea behind open-world gaming being freedom, it does sound like an odd choice but it all really hinges on compatability. I played a few hours of co-op with a "casual gamer" and ended up dragging Spyro around like a weekend at Bernie's. Imagine trying to comb the countryside looking for crystals (dragons use crystals to regain health and magic, and gain experience) while player 2 is trying to figure out which way forward is and you start to see the problem... You want to fly, P2 wants to run; you wall run like the gaming god you are, P2 is swinging the PS3 controller like a Wii Remote. One dragon dies (and die you will; the fighting is fierce and the enemy formidable and often in flight) and it's back to the checkpoint for you both. On the flip side, two equally skilled players (especially working together) will likely find this the best co-op gaming experience going. And who knows, this Hunter fellow (even though he looks like he might need a litter box) is trying to help. Either way, I'm too happy to care; this is a seriously magnificent game. The game worlds, both under- and overground, are simply breathtaking, and once again, as has become commonplace with the series, the role-playing elements are superb. Everything Too Human does wrong with character building Dawn of the Dragon does right. There's nothing extraneous or hackneyed about it. Add to that a fantastic new combat system highlighted by the superb flying dynamics and an even stronger cast (Christina Ricci brings her otherworldly charm to Cynder) and there's never been a better time to be a dragon.





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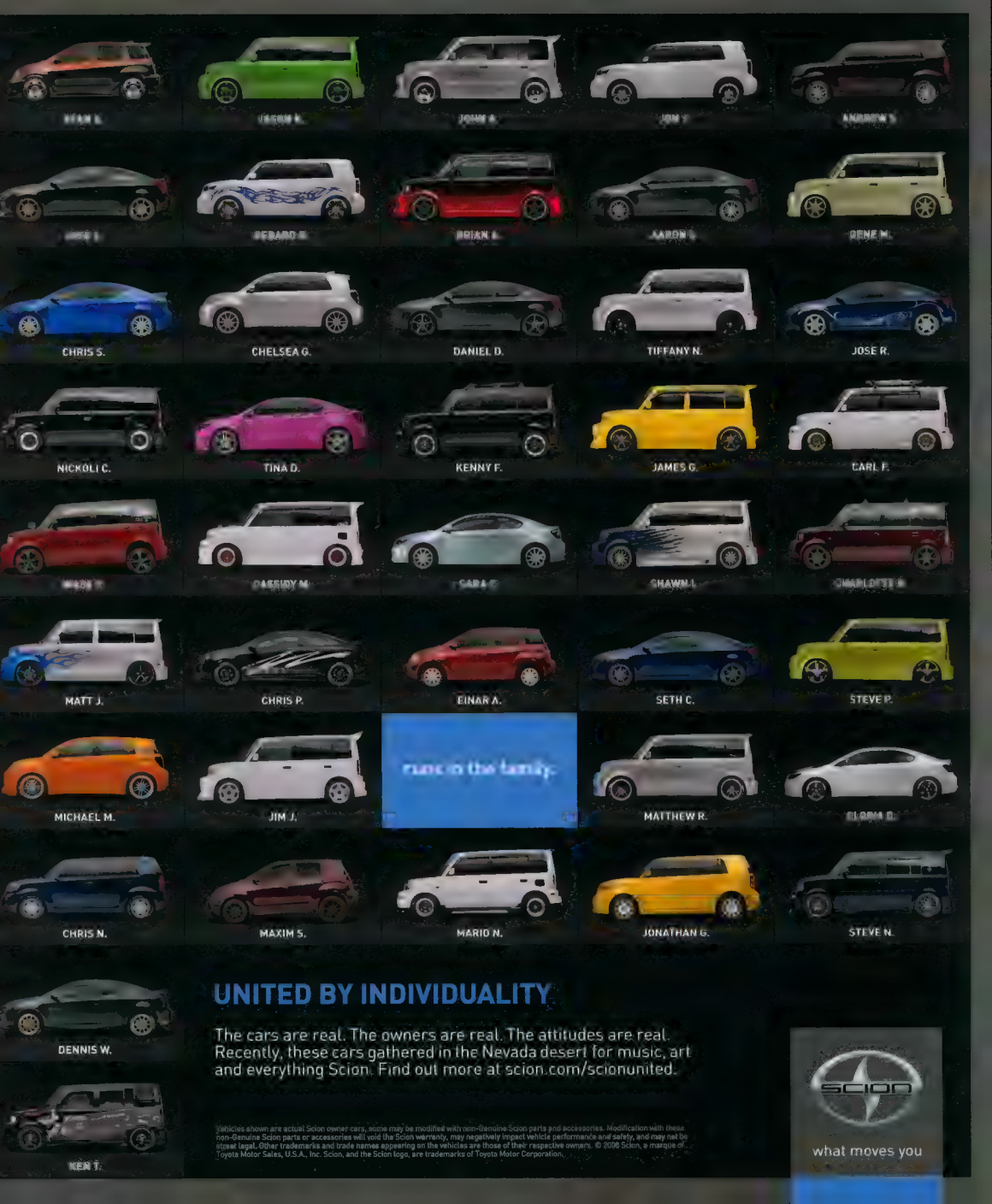
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System: PS3, 360 | Developer: Volition | Publisher: THQ | Available: October 14

SAINTS ROW 2

The first rule of project mayhem...

Words: Dave Halverson

The gaming world became a more interesting place when Saints Row rolled into town. The fact that the first franchise cut from the GTA mold could come from THQ, home to all things Pixar and Nicktoons, is what I love about the game industry... gangstas, pimps, 'n' hos, pole dancers and Scooby-Dooby-Doo!

For every unfortunate event that makes us think it's all going pear-shaped, something always happens to swing the pendulum back our way. THQ becoming a bastion for original new "gamers' games" is indicative of how wonderfully unorthodox the game business continues to be, even at this level. Of all the developers to break the ice—and this was thin ice; talk about inviting criticism—THQ chose Volition, even though they'd never made a sandbox game, and they came through with flying Krylon colors. Saints had its share of first-timer hiccups, but it also introduced character creation, drive-through absolution and gang culture. And nobody makes a burger like Freckle Bitches.

Of course, that was before Rockstar grabbed "the bar" and heaved it onto the far side of the moon with GTA's next-gen debut. When it turned out to be a goddamn Scorsese film, I couldn't imagine how Saints could compete. Then again, Rockstar shelled out $100 million and it took longer than high school to make, but all consumers see is $59.99. Whether by coincidence or crystal ball, the fact that they went in the exact opposite direction was a genius move. Saints 2 emphasizes an over-the-top gangland saga that falls closer to satire than drama.

It's been five years since the explosive conclusion of Saints Row, and get this...you lived! But just barely. The game opens on two detectives making their way to the prison infirmary to get a look at the scumbag who capped their fellow officers before getting blown to smithereens (ring any bells?). The bandages come off today, so it's time to put a face to all that plastic surgery. I'd like to propose a bill that makes character creation mandatory in all sandbox games or repetitious one-note action RPGs starring anyone other than Zala from Dark Kingdom. My first and biggest wish for Saints was that Volition would introduce female character creation, which might not be so cool if this wasn't the single best character creation system going—but it is, and I'm very grateful. Once you've chosen your basic framework based on sex, race, age, build and skin color, there's almost no end to creating the object of your desire, which now includes mannerisms, attitude, voice and how he or she walks, all of which affect how your character is viewed in the game.

After busting out of prison, you're met with some heavy news. The Row has become a corporate stronghold and elsewhere, new gangs have taken hold; Stilwater

"Rather than building the story around a single stronghold amidst the vastness of the city, every neighborhood has the potential to become your own personal hub."

as you knew it is gone. As for the 3rd Street Saints, Dex (the guy who blew you up) has gone into hiding, Johnny Gat's about to be sentenced on 300 counts of murder, his sister is dead, Julius has gone AWOL, and Troy (the rat) has worked his way up to chief of police. There is much work to be done. But first things first: Johnny's all you've got, so you better go get him. After a quick stop at Sloppy Seconds (prison overalls don't go over so well in court), the first mission is indicative of the bloody road ahead…even the judge has a shotgun. There's no good or evil in Saints 2. The gloves are pretty much off. Soon after you spring him, Johnny calls on you to help clear out the site he's got his eye on for the Saints rebirth, a vast hidden underground expanse, home to dozens of street people and burnouts who make perfect fodder for your new human-shield combat training, whereby you can grab anyone in the game and either use them as a bullet sponge or hurl them into harm's way, which, in this case, means their makeshift shelters. What a mess. The Saints' stronghold is also where your personal gang will reside, and a place to store any vehicles until you get a place of your own.

Hitting the streets, the protocol is much as you remember, only more refined in every way. Completing "Activities" earns cash and respect and opens key missions integral to the main story. What sets Saints 2 apart from any previous sandbox game, however—and the main reason I think it's such a great game—is only half the story. Saints is, to a large degree, what you make it. You can muscle through it to an extent, concentrating on weapons and bypassing all of the customization, but to really experience the game as it's intended, you need to shop…a lot.

Rather than building the story around a single stronghold amid the vastness of the city, every neighborhood has the potential to become your own personal hub. Why jet to the next hot spot and barely squeak by when you can move into the neighborhood? The more cash you earn via Activities, the more embedded you can become. You can buy cribs, cars, boats, clothes, weapons…even a business. I bought a gun store that pays $200 a day directly into my "stash," and I get a rad discount. And almost everything you buy can be modified. From a studio apartment to palatial estates, you set the theme, add an office, home theater, kitchen, wardrobe…the more cribs, the better, since you can access your money, weapons cache, wardrobe and vehicles or just hang out and play Zombie Invasion on your big flatty—a real 3-D zombie game you'd pay 10 bucks for on Live. And it's nice to have access to your hardware in case of any rival gang push-back in any of your neighborhoods.

Of course, it all hinges on Activities, which is where Volition unleashes their secret weapon…they're all crazy. Either they watch way too much Jackass or Borat works there ("My country send me to Stilwater to make movie-film. Please, come and see my film. If it not success, I will be execute"), or maybe both.

Activity: FUZZ
Objective: Impersonate an officer and smile for the camera.

people and cars aplenty, but it's not New York—it makes up for in gameplay. You can now vault over ledges and high walls, the main character animation is user specific and much improved, and the racing and driving overall (which now includes choppers, crotch rockets, dual purpose bikes, MX bikes, scooters, monster trucks and many more) is even better than it was in Saints, in which it was one of the game's biggest draws. And you get to keep them and, if you so desire, customize them. Between all the land vehicles, watercraft, planes and helicopters, you're gonna need a really big garage. Plus, radio stations, navigation, communication (cell phones), hot spots, detailed menus…it's all here and much more.

I have a long way to go in my first run-through (on normal difficulty), and I've yet to see the PS3 version, but it's safe to say that Saints Row 2 is definitely more of a good thing. If you liked Saints Row, you'll really like Saints 2, and if you didn't, you'll probably at least like it. If you like the exploration, mayhem and especially the immersion side of open-world gaming, Stilwater is definitely for you. Maybe I'll see you online—if so, look but don't touch. I can be a real bitch when I'm a bitch.

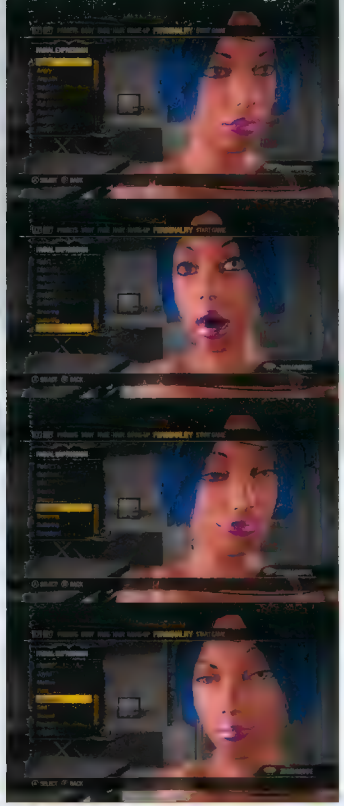
You can still take the beaten path (races, insurance fraud, assassination), but if you really want to get nuts, get ready for your 15 minutes in an episode of the reality show Fuzz, where they take a criminal such as yourself, dress them as a policeman or woman, and then ride along in the police cruiser while you handle legit police calls. Litterbugs, protestors, streakers…you're being timed, so who's got time for arrests? Besides, you're not even a cop. It's faster to beat 'em to death, roast 'em with your flamethrower or teach them a lesson they'll never forget ('cause they'll be dead) with a chain saw! You get rich and famous and the Stilwater PD's rep goes into the toilet. What could be better?

Escorting celebrities is another fine gig (throwing overzealous fans into designated death traps for cash money never gets old), but nothing beats Septic Avenger, the game where the more shit you shoot, the more money you make. When your friendly neighborhood realtor needs to drive property values down, who's he gonna call? Homes, cars, boats, pools, cop cars (and if they get out, the cops)…you man the high-pressure nozzle, he drives, and let the man-gravy fly! Now that's some next-gen shit right there

Not to say that Saints 2 is parody or a comedy, far from it—the core story is a no-holds-barred tale of revenge, rife with double crosses, murder, maniacs and twists—but elsewhere, there's a big, beautiful, load-free city to explore. What Stilwater lacks in population—there are

Activity: Septic Avenger
Objective: Man the crap cannon and don't miss a spot.

Face facts: Once you've molded a fine visage (am I good or what?) you can polish it off, setting expression, taunt, celebration, and swagger.



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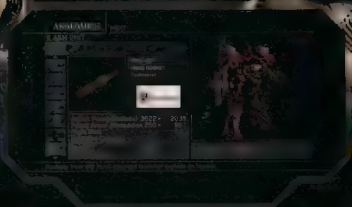

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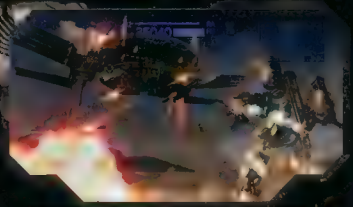

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FROM SOFTWARE

UBISOFT

Mushroom Men:
The Spore Wars

You want mushrooms on that?

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Somewhere in the heart of Texas (downtown Austin to be exact) Red Fly Studios has been toiling away on Gamecock's Mushroom Men for Wii, making the statement, "Red Fly's Mushroom Men from Gamecock feels great on my Wii" a completely legitimate declaration. It's moments like this that make me proud to be a gamer.

Gamecock and Red Fly (hell of a name for a buddy-cop TV show right there), we salute you.

When it comes to your assorted strains of anthropomorphic creatures and inanimate objects that become animate objects, I've encountered them all, from the majestic blue hedgehog to the wily one-eyed voodoo doll, but this was my first encounter with the fleshy spore-bearing fruiting body of a fungus. But I must digress…

Platformers were on the brink of a renaissance when Microsoft declared war on everything with a jump button. Conker had just grabbed "the bar," stirred his drink with it and harpooned the E in "Everyone," then Voodoo Vince pulled it out, stuck in his head and gaming got its mojo back. Tim Schafer's Psychonauts—only one of the most original interactive works of art ever made—was about to bring about world peace (we might all be jumping into next-generation psyches right now instead of beating robots with a stick), Tork couldn't wait to show off his world-beating prehistoric wonderland (and his sexy body), and Oddworld Stranger's Wrath was going to simultaneously make every first-person game that came before it look like Bubsy 3D. And then all of a sudden (imagine the sound of a toilet flushing) Platformers and character action games were phased out, and the industry started operation FPS. We went from all-character to no-character (except for that cool arm holding a gun) and from dexterous gameplay and cartoon violence, to bang-bang, you're very dead, and aren't those your brains over there? I kid the FPS people. There are many great non-gun-crazy-modern warfare FPSs that could solve the deficit problem too. All I'm saying is that platformers and FPSs can peacefully coexist, since Microsoft hit the refresh button on the executive wing.

Anyway, first time I saw an actual in-game screen shot of Mushroom Men it reminded me of where things were headed before the big flush, so I wasn't sure whether to get excited or run for cover. If it was exactly what it appeared to be—a baroque platform-adventure built around bi-pedal magic mushrooms—Microsoft would surely buy it and kill it; but if it was some lame hook masquerading as something as cool as a game built around bi-pedal magic mushrooms, I'd be getting all jazzed up for what could turn out to be some strange Wii salad migration. So I just kind of forgot about it.

Maybe 10 minutes into Mushroom Men, after the initial meet 'n' greet, I realized that I was a mile off in either direction. I got the baroque platform-adventure part right, but I certainly didn't expect a huge adventure on par with the kind of huge productions and high concepts you get from first-party games. Either Red Fly is operating out of an overseas bank vault, or they know something 90% of the developers who think that the Wii is a white PS2 don't. Either way, I'm launching a full investigation so you can read all about it next month.

The state of Mushroom Men's completely original world—a hypnotic wonderland filled with surreal characters and fierce predators—is a result of residual space dust from a huge meteorite (I must have missed the news report) that's rendered not just the mushrooms but all of nature's wonderful creatures "super" in their own special way. Most want to kill you. Pax fights back by cobbling together common household items such as a toothpick and a razor blade—this is taken to genius levels within massive-scale levels brimming with the kind of gear-works action-platforming fans live for, driven by a very special ambient soundtrack from Les Claypool.

The Conduit—the FPS said to look as good as a 360 game—and Mushroom Men arrived the same day. Nobody informed me there was a showdown scheduled but one ensued, and it turns out Mushroom Men is the one they should be pinning awards on—for graphics, level design, and play mechanics.

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System: PS3 | Developer: Quantic Dream | Publisher: SCEA Available: TBA

Heavy Rain

The Origami Killer

PS3 exclusive for grown-ups

words Brady Fiechter

"The facial detail is more than a technical interest...it's new territory for a game."

Heavy Rain's writer and director David Cage believes there aren't enough games that generate real adult satisfaction. He's right, of course, and when it's not the plastic representation of female sexuality or pointless depictions of violence, it's the storytelling that is consistently trivial. Cage likens most game narrative to pornography: If we are to be truly honest, the good parts are where the real satisfaction lies, and the best course of action is to fast-forward through that lame talking.

Heavy Rain as it is today—a demo of an urban house that won't even be in the final game—reveals nothing that will attest to the impact of its storytelling, but at the very least you can see the makers of Indigo Prophecy are in command of the PS3 hardware, working with lighting and texture and mood to build a scene of extraordinary visual impact. The facial detail of the central character is more than a technical interest; the way she manages to stay away from the creep factor and get close to a natural human visage is new territory for a game.

Yes, Heavy Rain is proving itself to be visually exciting and everything I see here drives most-wanted-game-in-the-coming-year status, but in no way does any of this indicate where the story will take the excitement.

It is up to Cage and his talking points to reveal story impact. One big goal is to ensure you play the story, not watch it. He makes an analogy of a rubber band: the way you can stretch it in multiple ways, yet it will return to its original form in the end. There will be flexibility in the way you play out the story, making decisions that may even kill off the character you have been guiding through Heavy Rain and introduce someone entirely new because of your actions, but the plot will inevitably not be altered. This, I would argue, is really the right way to deal with traditional narrative if you are to sustain proper emotional charge.

With the obvious inspirations of film technique in mind, Heavy Rain relies on camera and the scale of reality to frame static moments. In an effort to maintain fluid movement in the space and stay away from jarring controlling issues, the character is commanded by holding the trigger and directing the head toward where you want to move. Cage brings up the idea of a racing game, where you point the car on the track while holding the gas to move. This appears a bit awkward at times, but the visual dynamic it affords—indeed, it looks as if you could "control" the cut-scene, as Cage describes it—offers obvious possibilities that an early demo couldn't possibly put into full context.

All these moments will be lost in time, like tears ... in the rain.

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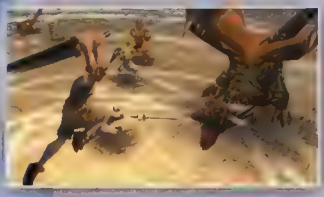

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System: **Develope** High Voltage Software **Publisher:** TBA | **Available:** Q1 2009

The Conduit

How far can Wii go?

words Dave Halverson

Back when Nintendo needed us lowly gamers to help launch the Wii in grand Nintendo fashion, they touted the system specs as somewhere between Xbox and Xbox 360/PS3, which, given the games we all imagined would spill our way, sounded just fine. Together with the promise of a completely revolutionary control scheme, the simple design, an extensive classics library, online functionality and the low price, the Wii seemed like the alternative console we'd all been dreaming about: a platform based on fun over megatech or multimillion-dollar epics (both of which I love dearly) that was both easy and cheap to make games for.

I'm not here to disparage the Wii in any way—in fact, I'm over it. I know what the Wii is. I've had detailed conversations with many developers on the front lines, who all say the same thing. The Wii can do some Xbox (not Xbox 360) type tricks, however, it's very expensive (as in, to develop) and requires a lot of memory, something the Wii doesn't have nearly enough of. And I'm fine with that... now. They didn't have to sugar-coat it for me. Nintendo has every right to dismiss "gamers" and choose profit over fandom. They're running a business. I don't think it's wise, but they always seem to find a way to come out on top, so who am I to disagree? I still play my Wii whenever a good system exclusive comes my way, and I always will.

High Voltage Software has set out to prove just how far the Wii can go, even claiming you'll think you're looking at a 360 game when you see The Conduit, an original FPS featuring a load of proprietary technology. Back at GDC, I must admit, the tech demo was indeed impressive. Not 360-impressive, but a level above anything I'd seen previously. Coming out of E3, a major online source touted The Conduit as the Wii game of the show, followed by an award for best new technology. I guess it worked, or at least I thought it did until a minute ago.

I really like and admire what High Voltage is trying to do and believe them to be a quality studio through and through. However, I'm also a developer's worst nightmare when it comes to technology. I don't run through games glancing at where the action takes me; I live in a game. If there are no enemies about, I don't even run. I walk, and in doing so look at everything...gradation around the base of trees, and from surface to surface, any limbs seeping through clothing or cloth, the sizes, realism and weight of any appliances or fixtures and so on. Not to find fault, but to gauge where the developer's focus went, where they spent the money. If I'm playing a burning-hot action game, battling highly detailed monsters with a superbly animated heroine, I don't expect extraneous details. But if I'm playing an FPS with NO character, everything I see had better look and feel mighty good. Aside from the tech, The Conduit has some serious art issues. The stop signs, for instance, are the same height as the parking meters and look like cardboard cutouts, store signs are of the same blurry faux quality as bottom-level PS2, and the cars just look small and weird. The technology is even more jarring. The simulated normal mapping is only on select surfaces, creating a strange contrast. Up close, glass looks bad, the foliage is formed in sheets, thicknesses are all over the place, and fine detail is a strangely mixed bag. At a glance, the game looks shiny and cool, I'll give them that. And certain elements do look impressive, but in the land of counterfeit technology, which is where The Conduit is from, The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay (followed by Phantasm) is still the reigning champion. What Starbreeze did for Xbox, High Voltage cannot do for Wii. At least not within the confines of a manageable budget.

What troubles me is the state of the actual game. The control is way too loose and prone to sticking Red Steel-style, only far worse. The simple act of walking and turning is painfully lethargic, to the extent that it's actually difficult to stay oriented, and the line of sight is curiously limited to about three or four feet in front of where your feet should be if you could see them, making it impossible to dodge shots below the knee, where the first boss really likes to aim. The characters seem right out of *Independence Day* (with a splatter of insect DNA), as does the story to some degree—not that it's necessarily bad, just predictable.

Of course, bear in mind that this is based on early code. The controls can still be dialed in. Line of sight and visuals, given this was a locked-down E3 demo meant to impress, are probably pretty close. I'm not prejudging The Conduit as a game. I have high hopes it will be a good one. I am, however, calling a spade a spade, as we all should. The Wii is not an Xbox. In fact, I'd argue it's a GameCube. That doesn't take away from all the games like de Blob, No More Heroes, Smash Bros., Mario Kart, Super Mario Galaxy, RE4, Twilight Princess, Lost Winds and so on that keep me glued in spite of anything Nintendo might say or do.

"I really like and admire what High Voltage is trying to do and believe them to be a quality studio through and through..."

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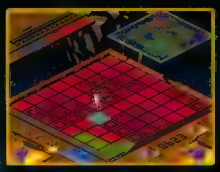

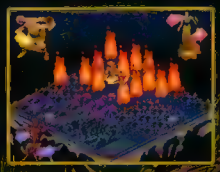

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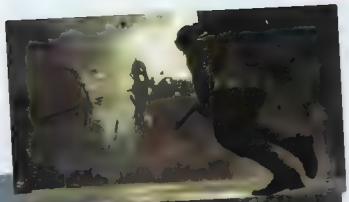
System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC | **Developer:** Treyarch | **Publisher:** Activision Blizzard | **Available:** TBA

Call of Duty: World at War

World War II gone extreme

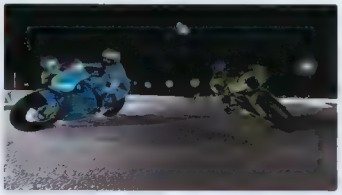


This is the most graphically violent first-person shooter to cary the World War II flag. It's the first time Call of Duty has carried a Mature rating, which is driven home in the opening scene on the lush Makin Atoll as a Japanese soldier tortures his prey before the usual all-hell-breaks-loose move into battle.

Early in the war, the Japanese were known to be brutal and aggressive, storming their foes with less strategy and more kamikaze fury: the game depicts this early on, bringing the AI right into your face, inviting the use of a shotgun for full effect; blood and stripped limbs are on the table in this latest Call of Duty. A flame thrower also comes into play later on for big swaths of instant destruction and a chance to show off some effects.

The game feels really good, and while I've only stormed through a single impressive area in Berlin, this is quite a step up from Treyarch's last—admittedly limited by time and other factors, says Treyarch—effort with Call of Duty 3. Something about the violence early on was unsettling, perhaps a bit jarring within the context of the setting. But this is still a very gamey game when you get into, say, competitive co-op, which brings in multipliers and other rewards for the kill. Whether you're over the theme, the craft behind Call of Duty: World at War is strong. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Milestone | **Publisher:** Capcom | **Avail:** October



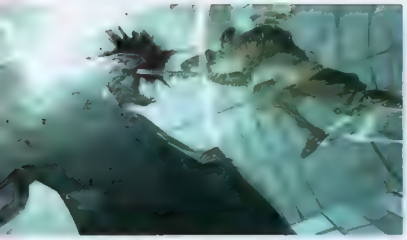
MotoGP 08

Can Cammy be my pit girl?

MotoGP 07 was and is one of the greatest racing simulations ever produced. I remember playing it for our cover story—one of only two racing games we've put on the cover in 7 years—trying to imagine what Climax could possibly do to MotoGP 08 that would compel me, or anyone else in possession of MotoGP 07, to buy it. It was like they peaked early. Maybe they should have held back a little. It was the Extreme Mode—17 street courses on customized bikes—that sealed it. The 07 Championship was pretty much perfect and 16-player online seemed like a good number. Case closed. It was THQ's problem anyway...

I was surprised, to say the least, when Capcom locked up the worldwide rights, but at the same time, somewhat intrigued. With Climax out of the picture to build me the perfect motocross game, at the very least, the results would be interesting.

Spending the evening with a preview version of Milestone's first next-gen kick at the can, I recalled when Climax did their initial 360 game, because I picked it apart for all the little details I thought the newfound go juice would bring: detailed pit areas, realistic crowds, realistic physics and terrain deformation in the sandy shoulders... all of which they delivered and more with their last game. Milestone seems to be charting a similar course. Outside of the fine detail, the game looks shiny and next-gen but there's a disconnect between the bikes and the asphalt; they need to let some air out of the tires. The overall presentation seems a bit dull too, but it is a preview. It's certainly user friendly, with several levels of simulation, and so far I'm having a good time with the 125 series. The true test though can't even begin until the tank is 100% topped off.



System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** From Software | **Publisher:** Microsoft | **Avail:** Early 2009

Ninja Blade

Hack, slash, from Otogi guys

Ninja Blade. Say it with me. Ninja Blade. That's like the most badass name for a videogame ever, right? You throw up a title like that, you better have the juice to back it up. If the minute of gameplay we saw at Microsoft Japan's 2008 strategy conference was any indication, the team behind From Software's singularly rad Otogi series has the mad juice.

Despite surface similarities to a certain other third-person ninja action game developed in Japan and published by Microsoft, Ninja Blade appears to be far less cartoony and much more cinematic than Tecmo's slashfests. Indeed, From Software dubs the game "Cinematic Action," promising completely seamless transitions between gameplay and cutscenes directed by Production IG animator Itsuro Kawasaki. The project boasts other name staff as well, including character designer Keiji Nakaoka of Capcom, and wünderkind composer Norihiko Hibino of Metal Gear Solid series fame.

During the brief snippet of footage seen at the conference, hero Ken leapt from a helicopter hovering over real-life Shinjuku, plummeted hundreds of feet, smashed through plate glass into a skyscraper, then seamlessly proceeded to engage in furious battle with fantastical, grotesque enemies. As in Otogi, destructible scenery was in great abundance—Ken pulverized columns, walls and furniture as he dispatched his foes with extreme shinobi verve. As soon as the presentation began, however, it was over... yet it was quite clear that the three-years-in-the-making Ninja Blade will be one to watch closely. **Nick Des Barres**

System: Xbox 360, PS3 | **Developer:** Grin Software | **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment | **Available:** December 2008

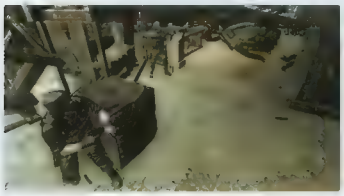
Wanted

No, that's the name of the game.

By the time Wanted the videogame hits store shelves, the memory of the film will be a little dimmed. That's because the producers at Grin were more interested in completing an original extension of the Wanted world than simply rushing a title to the store shelves. Instead of rehashing the story we've already seen, Grin is set to deliver an all-new adventure that takes place after the movie ... and perhaps, before it. One of the levels we were shown involves a shoot-out on a crashing passenger jet. We've all imagined having gun fights on crashing planes, right? Right, gang?

Here's the skinny. Controlling Wesley, players dash from cover point to cover point, utilizing the industry's favorite new mechanic. Chaining together effective hiding spots, Wesley can dash behind enemies and take them by surprise, or he can methodically bear down on them from across the room. Like Tequila Time in Stranglehold, Wesley builds up his Assassin meter by killing enemies and chaining cover ... and then can unleash special attacks by employing the meter. The environment has limited interactivity—for example, players can shoot out airplane doors and watch enemies get sucked into the cold vacuum of 30,000 feet, or you can blast fire-extinguishers for local explosions. The most exciting part of Wanted is curving bullets, a feature still being tweaked as we write. Currently, players pause the action using Assassin time, and select an arc for the bullet from several options. Depending on the arc, a lucky Wesley can take out more than one enemy at a time, as the shard smashes through skull after skull. We wish we could tell you more about the game ... but it'll have to wait for the review! **Heather Campbell**

"Like Tequila Time in Stranglehold, Wesley builds up his Assassin Meter by killing enemies..."



System: Xbox 360, PS3 | **Developer:** Square Enix | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **Available:** 2009

Final Fantasy XIII

Potentially the Final Fantasy on 360.

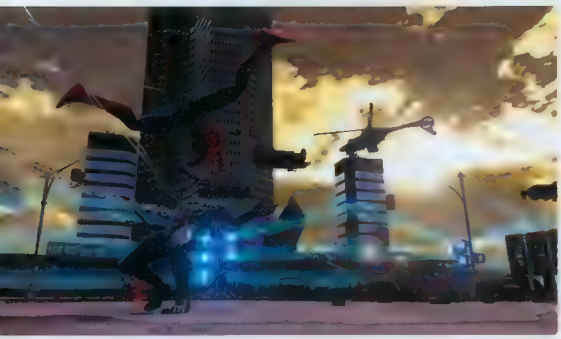
Though it shares a director with Final Fantasy X-2, it looks like Final Fantasy XIII is shaping up to be anything but girly. Featuring a heroine modeled after VII's Cloud, long-haired Lightning adds another storm-themed protagonist to the FF series ... and judging by her persistent pout, it looks like she'll be just as sullen as the character who inspired her. Desperate gamers can play a demo level by purchasing the Blu-ray edition of Final Fantasy Advent Children (from Japan—don't worry, with Blu-Ray, the region is the same as ours) in March of next year-a fitting pack-in, since the dynamic ATB-based battles are supposedly influenced by the pace of fight scenes in Advent Children. Until then, these new and shiny screenshots should keep you appetized through the winter. **Heather Campbell**

System: Xbox 360, PS2, PS3, Wii, PC | **Dev:** Treyarch/Shaba Games | **Pub:** Activision Blizzard | **Avail:** Oct

Spider-Man: Web of Shadows

Saving the day!

The Spider-Man series has been up and down, never quite knowing what kind of game it ultimately wants to be. The open-world quality has felt more like an excuse to say "hey, we're open world" and the combat has never been quite up to par, leaving the surface appeal to zipping around with the web-slinging mechanic. With Spider-Man: Web of Shadows, that zipping around part is certainly at its best, more fluid and rhythmically satisfying, and the combo attacks—which open up depending on how you power-up Spidey through a branching experience system—show the possibility for a little depth. Vertical and air attacks along walls and off ceilings are in, bringing more of a real super-hero feel to the game. A strong visual design this time out is complemented by personal touches on familiar faces from the comic-book. **Brady Fiechter**



System: Wii | **Developer:** Tecmo | **Publisher:** Tecmo | **Available:** December

Rygar: The Battle of Argus

Don't ignore it this time!

Rygar: The Battle of Argus was announced ages ago for the Wii, but this very welcome remake of the PlayStation 2 game became such a mystery that we started to wonder if it ever really existed in the first place. It does indeed exist, to be released before Christmas and fully detailed at the Tokyo Game Show next month. The base of the game will be familiar to fans of the PlayStation 2 effort, bringing back the central mechanic of the Diskarmor while adding in new enemies and moves that invite the use of the Wii Remote. The Wii could use a game like this, and if Tecmo manages to introduce new players to what was an exceptional action game in its last outing, we'll take it. **Brady Fiechter**

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Still Playing

Five reasons the PlayStation 2 isn't done yet

Almost eight years and 140+ million worldwide sales later, the PlayStation 2 is unquestionably one of the most successful and popular pieces of gaming hardware of all time. And yet, as a new generation of consoles and handhelds fight to secure their own places in the market (and on store shelves), some are ready to consider the venerable platform a relic of the past. The PS2 is far from dead, however, and here are five examples of upcoming exclusives the consoles will soon be seeing in North America that will keep it going strong into 2009.

words Eric L. Patterson

Yakuza 2

Publisher: Sega | **Release Date:** Sept. 2008

For a while there, it seemed like a U.S. release of the second chapter of the Yakuza saga might never come. Then, not only do we find out that we are indeed getting the game, but we're getting it complete with the original Japanese voices to boot. If that wasn't enough, Yakuza 2 is set in one of the best cities on Earth: my unofficial second hometown of Osaka, Japan.

Want the full scoop on Yakuza 2? If you haven't already, check out Casey's review of the game conveniently located in this very issue.

One of the downsides of living in Osaka: giant crabs attack on a daily basis

Persona 4

Publisher: Atlus | **Release Date:** December 2008

Some of the PlayStation 2 games that end up coming our way are a total surprise upon announcement; Persona 4 was not one of those games. With Persona 3 (and its revision Persona 3 FES) being a smashing success between critics and gamers alike, there was simply no way Atlus was about to miss the chance to bring us this new chapter of the Persona series before the PS2 slips quietly into the night.

Which, of course, is good for us. Persona 4 promises to build and expand upon everything that players loved in the previous outing, offering an experience that is bigger, deeper and far more involving. The Social Link system–one of Persona 3's most interesting features–makes a return here, and now not only are you given more options for how you grow your relationships with others, but those bonds will have a far greater effect on what happens during battle.

The setting this time around is the rural Japanese town of Inaba, where urban legends surrounding a mysterious television channel mix with a rash of murders that seem linked to the weather. It's a darker, more mature overall tone that gives a bit of a nod to the PS1 days of Persona.

Persona 4 brings with it more types of personas to create and summon

Eternal Poison

Publisher: Atlus | **Release Date:** February 2009

Speaking of North American releases that come as a total surprise, here's one that many assumed would end up forever staying a Japanese exclusive. Originally released under the title Poison Pink in its home country, Eternal Poison came hot on the heels of Flight-Plan's previous strategy RPG Dragon Shadow Spell, and what stood out most between the two games was the vast difference in their visuals. Instead of the more familiar colorful, anime-esque sprites and environments, Poison dressed itself in a unique (not to mention quite attractive) dark fantasy / gothic art style, with character designs that at times seemed to take a few hints from the Japanese "Elegant Gothic Lolita" fashion trend.

Eternal Poison's world is centered around three central characters–Thage, Olifen, and Ashley–who set off to brave the realm of Besek, home to the demonic Majin. It is said that within the depths of Besek exists the mythical "Eternal Poison," which legend has it can not only make one's dreams and desires come true, but also give them the ability to tap into the sinister power of the Majin.

One of the most notable aspects in place here is the ability to capture the demons you'll meet in Besek instead of killing them. By allowing your foes to live, you can then summon them later to aid you in battle, or even sacrifice them to gain extra benefits.

Playing out over five different stories that offer up a variety of choices and options as to how things will turn out, Eternal Poison looks to be another interesting offering for strategy RPG-loving PlayStation 2 owners.

Ar Tonelico 2

Publisher: NIS America | **Release Date:** December 2008

The original Ar Tonelico was an interesting mix of GUST-brand Japanese RPG traditions, visual novel-style character relationship building elements, and a script that was laced with humor and sexual innuendo. This December, we'll find out if the second time is indeed the charm as the series is back for another round in Ar Tonelico 2.

Set a little over a year after the first game, AT2 is based around Infel Pira, the second "Tower of Ar Tonelico" located in the region of Metafalss. There, a strange disease has been killing the artificial life forms known as Reyvateils, and the Church of Pastalia sends a young knight named Croix to try to discover the source of the epidemic so that it can be stopped before it's too late.

Ar Tonelico 2 looks to offer up many of the familiar features that drew players to the first game, while also adding in some improvements along the way. In addition to a host of refinements made to the game's battle system, AT2 will put much more importance on the Cosmosphere, the portion of the game where players build relationships with their Reyvateil partners to help them unlock new abilities and powers.

The sign of a good Japanese RP cute characters causing chaos

The King of Fighters '98: Ultimate Match

Publisher: SNK Playmore USA | **Release Date:** Q4 2008

The King of Fighters '98 was the best chapter of the King of Fighters series ever released.

Okay, so, even though a crazed KoF fan or two may exist out there somewhere that would disagree with such a statement, there's absolutely no argument over the fact that not only is KoF'98 considered by many to be one of the best titles of the franchise, but also one of the best fighters to have ever come from SNK period. SNK Playmore themselves acknowledged that sentiment when they dusted the game off and presented to the world The King of Fighters '98: Ultimate Match.

Why should you be excited about Ultimate Match, especially if you already own one (or more) copies of KoF '98? Presented here is an expanded character roster (all pre-'98 characters that weren't originally included); the choice of reworked polygonal or original 2D backgrounds, along with some all new stages; a third "Ultimate" mode that mixes gameplay aspects of the "Extra" and "Advanced" modes; an updated, redesigned interface; and a host of other refinements or additions to make the classic fighting game even better.

If you've never played The King of Fighters '98 before, here's your chance to correct that mistake, and see exactly what you've been missing out on all this time.

The classic arcade KoF '98. Think this, but more ultimate

What's Next?

So, are these five games the end of what the PlayStation 2 has in store beyond multi-platform releases? If I were a betting man–which, I suppose I am–my bet would be with no. Sony still has a lot of opportunities to keep the PlayStation 2 alive and kicking–a $99 price tag for one–and as long as people are still buying PS2 games, companies will keep releasing them. There are still a number of currently import-only releases that have a chance of making it over here, from more likely picks such as Devil Summoner: Raidou Kuzunoha Versus King Abaddon, DragonBall Z: Infinite World, or Thunder Force VI, to more long-shot choices like Kingdom Hearts Re:Chain of Memories or Tatsunoko vs. Capcom; which, of course, would have to go through a slight revision due to licensing issues. Something like, oh I don't know... that wacky idea floating around on the internet of changing the Tatsunoko characters into, say, Marvel ones?

Found in Translation

Tired of begging for official localizations of cult Japanese titles, fan groups are taking matters into their own hands

words Casey Loe

After two years of waiting, English-speaking fans of Nintendo's Earthbound/Mother franchise will finally be able to play Mother 3 in their native tongue...with no thanks due to Nintendo. After failing at a lengthy campaign to convince Nintendo to localize the series' final chapter, a team of roughly a dozen translators, script editors and ROM hackers set about preparing an English localization of Mother 3 themselves and making it available as a free—and almost certainly illegal—downloadable patch.

This is not a new phenomenon. Hackers and translators have been teaming up for years to bring abandoned Japanese videogames to any English speaker with access to a PC and emulation software. Sixteen-bit RPGs were an early focus of fan translations and remain a popular choice today, due as much to personal ethics as personal preferences. "We work on older games in an effort to minimize the impact on the sales of current-generation titles, especially for games that might have a chance at an American localization," explains Gideon Zhi, whose Aeon Genesis group has localized 66 titles, including more SNES RPGs than every legitimate videogame publisher of the era, combined. "We absolutely don't work on titles that might make it to America at any point in the foreseeable future."

But more and more fan translation groups are turning their attention to modern titles, and a collision between the fan translation community and the videogame industry seems increasingly inevitable. One group has already completed work on a fan translation of Monster Hunter Portable 2G for PSP, even as Capcom USA was teasing the possibility of an official North American release on their Web site. That sort of thing clearly goes beyond preserving a lost classic, and risks cutting into official sales or even discouraging a publisher from attempting an official North American localization.

> "Hackers and translators have been teaming up for years to bring abandoned Japanese games to English speakers..."

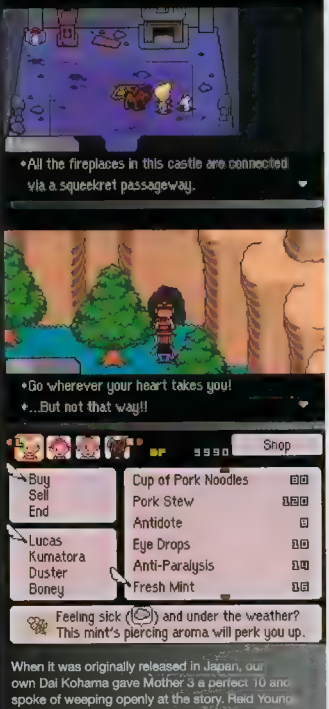
But it's hard to argue with the motivations of fans who just want to get games into the hands of English-speaking audiences while the titles remain fresh and culturally relevant. Matt Dunajcik, an amateur translator and passionate fan of Namco Bandai's Tales series, decided that things weren't looking good for an official release of the Nintendo DS title Tales of Innocence, and began work on a fan translation seven months after its Japanese release. "With two current [Tales] localizations pending U.S. release and Tales of Hearts already announced for the DS, I was willing to take my chances," explains Dunajcik. "Honestly, I wouldn't complain if the game were announced for localization, it would save me a whole lot of trouble. If that were to happen, the project would stop immediately. There are tons of games left untranslated, so I wouldn't be working on this one if I expected it to be localized."

The Legacy of Fansubs

The issues surrounding fan translations should sound familiar to anyone who follows the anime industry, which has been dealing with unauthorized fansubs for a longer time and on a much larger scale. Fansubs remain a hot-button topic among publishers, despite a fansub community code of ethics designed to protect domestic anime localization companies. One rule is that money must never change hands for the fansub maker's efforts. Another is that all efforts cease as soon as a publisher announces they have acquired a title for domestic release. Thanks to these rules, fansub communities have often enjoyed cordial relationships with publishers, who benefit from the free market research provided by fansub releases—several series that were initially passed over for U.S. release as being too niche were given a second look after they became underground hits.

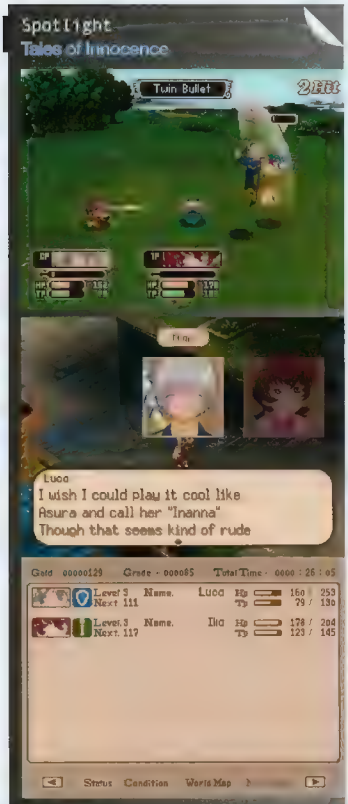
But even strict adherence to this code of ethics seems to be grievously harming the industry; some figures show domestic anime DVD sales down 20 percent last year,

Spotlight
Mother 3



When it was originally released in Japan, our own Dai Kohama gave Mother 3 a perfect 10 and spoke of weeping openly at the story. Reid Young of Starmen considers it "a fantastic piece of art," and launched what was probably the largest fan campaign in videogame history to get Nintendo to localize it (go to starmen.net/ebsiege/japan for an example of the incredible lengths they've gone to). For whatever reason—most likely the unfortunate combination of high localization costs, middling sales of Earthbound (aka Mother 2) and the waning commercial viability of Game Boy Advance software—Nintendo passed.

But no one knows the Mother series better than Starmen, and they're going all out to make a localization worthy of the title, including re-creating Japanese title cards, rerecording a few sound files and even redrawing sprites to make them consistent with the changes Nintendo made to Earthbound. You can follow the fan localization process at mother3.fobby.net.


Spotlight
Tales of Innocence
Twin Bullet
2Hit
Luca
I wish I could play it cool like
Asura and call her "Inanna"
Though that seems kind of rude
Gald 00000129 Grade - 000085 Total Time - 0000 : 26 : 05
Level 3 Name. Luca HP 160 / 253
Next 111 TP 79 / 130
Level 3 Name. Ilia HP 178 / 204
Next 117 TP 123 / 145
Status Condition World Map

Tales of Innocence seemed like an ideal title for a North American localization, but with Tales of Vesperia and Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World in the pipeline, Namco Bandai USA hasn't shown any interest. Fan translator Matt Dunajcik has loftier goals for the series: "I hope that one day, all of the Tales series will be available in English. More than anything, that's the goal I'm working toward."

But the Tales series is legendary for its volume of text, and Dunajcik estimates that both he and his programming partner will have put a thousand man-hours into the project by the time it's completed. Dunajcik justifies his free labor as practice for what will hopefully one day be a career, and finds compensation of a sort in the fan community that surrounds the project. "What makes ROM hacking special is that it gets whole communities of gamers involved in the process...the supportive comments we get, the thanks we receive, those are as good as any paycheck to me." You can join the community at zettaizero.wordpress.com.

"What makes ROM hacking special is that it gets whole communities of gamers involved in the process..."

despite rising attendance at anime conventions and continued growth in affiliated industries like manga. It isn't hard to guess why—when someone with a hard drive full of ethical fansubs wants to watch some anime, he won't be in any hurry to visit the video store and whip out his wallet.

Gray Areas

Of course, the domestic videogame industry differs from the anime industry in several important ways. While Dunajcik agrees that the videogame industry has cause for concern, he notes that "anime has a long shelf life and classic series sell just as well, if not better than modern ones...That is something you don't have with games." It is possible that passed-over titles could one day be localized for domestic download services such as Nintendo's Virtual Console, which now hosts a dozen or so games that had never been previously localized for the North American market. But Gideon Zhi is skeptical that the text-heavy RPGs favored by fan translators would ever find a place on the service. "Localization for a 40-hour RPG with a $10 price point just isn't financially feasible."

There is also a key legal difference between fan-translated games and fansubbed anime. While anime fansubs contain an unauthorized copy of the anime in question, videogame fan translations do not typically contain any of the original game code. Instead, the translators distribute a patch that replaces the original text of the game with the localized version. The player must provide his own copy of the game data, as well as the software emulator on which to play it. This probably just ends up pushing the onus of piracy onto players, but many fan translators do urge their communities to purchase legitimate Japanese copies of the games through import stores and auction sites. "I have purchased every game that I have ever worked on and I expect those that use my translation to do the same," says Dunajcik. "But if someone really wants to pirate the game or use our patch in a way that wasn't intended, there's not much that we can do to stop them."

While distributing patches instead of fully translated software may or may not protect fan translation groups from charges of piracy, there is no doubt that the translations themselves run afoul of long-established international law. Artists and publishers have broad legal rights to control the translations or their works, but the remedies available to them may not prove effective against nonprofit fan efforts. Were a company to take action against fansubbers or fan translators, no one knows exactly what would happen. A few cease-and-desist letters have been sent out over anime fansubs, but such cases are rare, and are virtually unheard of in the world of videogame fan translations.

An Unspoken Truce?

The more interesting question isn't whether the videogame industry *could* stop fan translations—it's why they don't even try. It's not as if they aren't aware of what's happening. Reid Young, one of the cofounders of Starmen, the Mother series fan group that is now localizing Mother 3, discussed the project with Nintendo

"The interesting question isn't whether the industry *could* stop fan translations...it's why they don't even try."

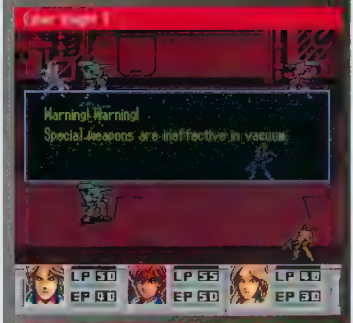
employees several times in the last few years. "In 2006 we got a message from a high-profile Nintendo employee who, after dispensing with some legal unpleasantries, indicated that our fan translation might not even be necessary if we could [use our fan community to] boost the sales of another niche game that was being released at the time," Young recounts. Starmen declined the offer. "In early 2007 we were approached by someone involved with Mother 3 [in Japan]. They wondered if perhaps we could work together to legitimize the fan translation by obtaining a license and publishing the game. Long story short: After months of planning and communication, things fell through."

Young and other members of Starmen visited Nintendo's headquarters later that year, and heard from employees that people within Nintendo were excited about their fan translation. "That was surprising news mixed with a sobering realization," recalls Young. "Nobody would be excited about a fan translation if there was, indeed, an official effort under way." But Nintendo apparently wasn't interested in supporting their translation in any official capacity. Starmen and an established game development studio later made inquiries about officially licensing the title and publishing it independently, but according to Young, "Nintendo slammed the door without an explanation. At that point, we realized that we had pretty much exhausted all of our [safe] options for making this a legitimate release."

So if publishers aren't interested in working with fan translation groups, why aren't they trying to stop them? Perhaps they've learned the lessons of the anime industry and are optimistic that fan translations will attract new players to the series—a downloader impressed with Tales of Innocence certainly might go on to buy the official Tales releases. Or perhaps the publishers simply fear the PR consequences of going against their most passionate fans, and view turning a blind eye to fan translations as a way to get advocacy groups like Starmen off their backs.

"I genuinely wish Nintendo would talk to us," says Young. "We would love to find a way to legitimize this effort—WiiWare, for example, seems promising. Just imagine all the benefits that could come from a licensing agreement: Nintendo, [developer] Brownie Brown, [Mother 3 writer Shigesato] Itoi and the fan translation team would get paid for their years of labor. The fans, after waiting 13 years, would finally get their sequel. That would be dozens—if not hundreds—of thousands of happy customers, plus a swarm of new ones wondering what the buzz is about. Nintendo would lay the groundwork for significantly lowering the cost of localization and marketing by harnessing the talents and energies of fans. Some sorely-needed positive PR would mitigate this year's E3 debacle. And fans would avoid the guilt, hand wringing and frustration that sometimes accompanies dealing with ROMs, patches and emulators, respectively."

Young realizes that this is an unlikely scenario, but the lack of legal hostilities does give us hope that, one day, rights holders and fan translators will enjoy something closer to the open (if complicated) relationship that anime fansubbers share with anime publishers. As Dunajcik puts it, "My long term goal is, in fact, to be noticed by these companies. But I hope my first contact with them isn't via their legal department."



Spotlight

The RPG boom of the 16-bit era was a fascinating time, with scores of developers experimenting with original RPG franchises. Only a tiny fraction of those titles were ever localized for Western audiences, and Gideon Zhi's Aeon Genesis is the most prolific of the fan translation groups filling in the gaps. Due to the relatively limited amount of text in older games and the quality of the tools available for hackers, Zhi estimates that he is able to complete an average 16-bit project with two to four people working for around 50 hours a piece.

Zhi lists the Cyber Knight series, Madou Monogatari, Live-A-Live, Metal Max Returns and Front Mission: Gun Hazard as the favorite titles in his catalog. "Gun Hazard probably tops the list...Cyber Knight does some great things, though, and Madou Monogatari is just *so* adorable." Zhi is currently juggling over a dozen new projects, so keep an eye out at agtp.romhack.net for updates on the upcoming translations of Mystic Ark and Madara 2, another pair of Super Famicom classics.

Either you get it.

As seen on The Tonight Show and Conan O'Brien

Or you don't.

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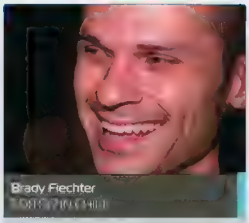
Dave Halverson

Modus Operandi: I don't take reviewing games lightly—no siree. I get deep into a game in accord with the audience the developer is aiming to gratify, and then review from that perspective with an eye on design, artistry, animation, attention to detail, physics, audio, and functionality.
Brain Drain: October was supposed to be the calm before the storm...not the storm! I've barely slept in a week! I may be haggard and look like Claire Redfield oughta pop a cap in my ass, but it's been a fun ride. If you're reading something of mine this month and it sounds like I'm mental, I assure you, it's only temporary. I plan on sleeping for a week and then going on a Fable 2, Sonic Unleashed, Little Big Planet, Bionic Commando, Golden Axe binge. Along with the ones I can't think of because my brain is shutting down.
Game of the Month: Mushroom Men of Ecclesia of the Dragon!

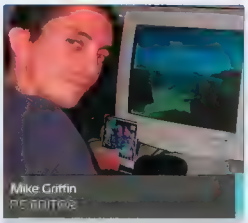


Brady Fiechter

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: You know how when you've just spent a week in the desert, so very thirsty, and toilet water would quench your thirst? When you're dying for science fiction, *Babylon AD* is that similar fix. I'm a sucker for grand visions onscreen, and this one gave me just enough to walk away satisfied. Yummy summer Vin cheese.
Game of the Month: Brad

Greg Orlando

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!
Brain Drain: The makers of the film *Death Race* included a disclaimer at the end of their film. Who could have imagined I shouldn't mount machine guns on mom's car and compete in races where the goal is to kill other people?
Game of the Month: Spore



Mike Griffin

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me, as it can crucially impede or compliment the flow of ideas that a game is attempting to communicate.
Brain Drain: Browser-based games are huge. How about a universal RPG that allows users to log-in via any popular platform—computers, consoles, portables? Whatever mobile device you grab on the way out the door, whatever system you sit down to play, you could make progress towards the same meta-game.
Game of the Month: S.t.a.l.k.e.r.: Clear Sky (PC)

Nick Des Barres

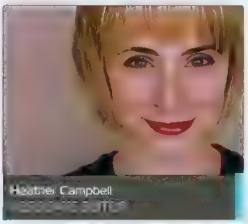
Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.
Brain Drain: Startup logos. End them. If I had ¥5 for every minute of my life wasted by hammering Start to skip past publisher, licensor, developer, middleware, codec company and caterer logos, I'd be able to buy a McShrimp Burger Value Set. I recognize such things may be contractual, but surely a system could be implemented to allow one to skip them if a game save were on your hard drive?
Game of the Month: Sigma Harmonics

Casey Loe

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.
Brain Drain: Outside of Tales of Vesperia, there was no packaged game released in August on any platform that would have brought you as much joy as that same $60 spent on some combination of Geometry Wars 2, Braid, Bionic Commando, Galaga Legions, Castle Crashers, and Ratchet & Clank. That's certainly never happened before, and I still don't if I should be celebrating the rise of AAA DLC, or lamenting the summer's tepid slate of packaged games.
Game of the Month: Braid

ERIC L. PATTERSON

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: After seeing those new shots, there's no doubt in the hotness of Nomchan. (And seriously Square, you really should call her that.) PSP-3000 is also hotness, but I just cannot understand why SCEA hates giving us color variations without stupid graphics on them. I want a non-Vader Pearl White dammit!
Game of the Month: Rhythm Tengoku Gold



Heather Campbell

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: I've been driving to Walnut, CA on the weekends to play SF IV on a grey-market machine at the Super Arcade. The screens are blown out, it's not in HD, the sound is garbage, and the cost of the machine is 75 cents. But it's still fun. Now that producer Yoshinori Ono is grumbling that online play may be compromised by lag, I feel like Capcom needs to release the official cabinets in the States. Otherwise, nobody's going to enjoy this one.
Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV

Silent Hill: Homecoming

Every town has its secrets. Some are just less interesting than others.

Words: Casey Loe

"While the artists have done a respectable job, the game designers have mostly missed the point."

For a while there, I thought Double Helix had actually pulled it off. Silent Hill: Homecoming starts strong, with an otherworldly hospital scene that feels like vintage Silent Hill and does a fine job of showing off Homecoming's crisp textures, smoother combat and top-class enemy design and animation. When hero Alex Shepherd returns to his home in Shepherd's Glen, he finds it packed with creepy touches and intriguing plot hooks. The next few areas look pretty good, and, with the help of Akira Yamaoka's excellent scoring and a few pop-out-at-you scares, just about nail the series' rotting, desolate atmosphere.

Then, slowly but surely, Silent Hill: Homecoming starts spiraling downhill. The game's first few areas have disappointingly simple level designs; in a corridor full of doors, you rarely find more than one unlocked, and there are almost no items to uncover save for ammo, health drinks and a few keys. But rather than ramping up the complexity and easing players into traditional open-ended areas filled with interesting items that one must use in creative ways, the levels become even simpler. There are a few exceptions, but many of the game's later areas are basic tunnel crawls that don't even offer the illusion of freedom. With no sense of exploration, no strange items to puzzle over and little in the way of a plot to ponder, Silent Hill: Homecoming abandons the pretext of being an adventure game and degenerates into a grueling, repetitive monster masher.

As with Silent Hill Origins, the developers have used a moderate improvement in the game's combat mechanics to justify an increased focus on fighting, with mostly unsatisfying results. The new combat system allows Alex to dodge and counter enemy attacks and switch between weak and strong swings with melee weapons, but this usually just forces players to learn the timing of dodge-and-counterattack combos for each foe and then repeat them endlessly. Things get tougher when you're facing multiple foes, but not in a fun way, since the game is incredibly dark and you often can't track what's going on outside of your flashlight beam. While the number of enemies isn't too excessive, the limited amount of gun ammo forces you to do an awful lot of melee combat, and the linear areas make it hard to avoid fights. Silent Hill: Homecoming has no selectable difficulty settings and is quite challenging, which seems like an obvious misstep for a series that had always previously accommodated casual players.

While the designers of Silent Hill: Homecoming have mostly failed at capturing the series' exploration and puzzle-solving elements, the art team has done a much better job of capturing its visual appeal. The game looks significantly better in motion than it did in Konami's publicity shots (except in event scenes, where the camera foolishly zooms in on hideous chunks of polygonal hair and blocky, blown-out textures). The monster design and animations are particularly impressive, and the ability to carve wounds into foes is a nice touch. The texture artists and modelers have done a good job of rotting out locales like Silent Hill's Grand Hotel and Overlook Prison, although many other areas, like the city streets and the sewers beneath them, are disappointingly bland.

Silent Hill: Homecoming is not a horrible game, and it certainly has moments that capture that Silent Hill magic. But while the artists have done a respectable job, the game designers have mostly missed the point, reducing what should have been a mentally stimulating adventure into a shallow, linear monster masher with a few sliding block puzzles. Silent Hill: Homecoming's improved combat system hasn't been improved enough to carry a game that has so little else to offer.

parting shot

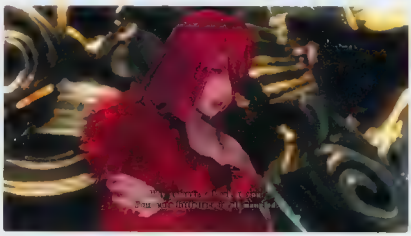
Skeptical fans may be surprised at how close Double Helix came to capturing the look of Silent Hill, but some of the game design decisions will confirm their worst fears. The return of Team Silent to the franchise is the homecoming that I'll be holding out for.

Infinite Undiscovery

The future of RPGs remains undiscovered.

words Heather Campbell

"There are enough heroes here to make the quest feel larger than it really is..."



In the course of his epic, world-saving quest, a young female villager runs up to our protagonist Capell, and says she'd do anything to thank him.

"*Anything*?" responds Capell, slyly.

"Anything," says the young, doe-eyed stranger.

"*Any-thing, anything*?" asks Capell again, making sure the deal is cemented.

"Anything," replies the girl.

"Anything!?"

"Knock it off." This comes from Capell's jealous female friend, Aya.

But Capell doesn't knock it off. For what seems like a full half hour of cutscenes, spread across an hour of gameplay, Capell can't stop bringing it up.

"She said she'd do anything," he says to himself. "*Anything*." And again, when they're saying goodbye, Capell reminds the girl, "You said you'd do *anything*."

Aya shakes her head. "We get it."

"Anything. Anything."

In any mature piece of media, this sort of dialogue would come from the mouth of a demented nephew, or perhaps a milk-drinking pedophile. Here, it's the creepy, awkward intentions of our *hero*. Coming from the game that boasted

sweeping changes for the semi-stagnant JRPG genre, it seems maturity remains out of its reach. In fact, when looking at Infinite Undiscovery from the height of Final Fantasy XII, the Tri-Ace title is a stumbling step backwards.

The game is fun, in bursts, during combat. Turn-based strategy has finally fallen to the instant gratification of button mashing, and when Capell is joined by small armies of his companions, the screen is full of life and chaos. At times, it feels like a brawler, bashing enemies for up to twenty minutes straight without pause, the inventory menu inaccessible (unless you want to risk pulling your attention away from a fight, which continues in real-time). Running around with a screen-full of colorful comrades is silly, pleasant stuff...even when the game suffers from slowdown. There are enough heroes here to make the quest feel larger than it really is, and frankly, this many people striking at the same time reminds me of an MMORPG

You can never directly control the secondary characters, but you can issue commands via the "Connect" menu, which allows Cappell to order a specific attack from one of your party members. With eighteen characters to assemble your party from, and a huge number of character-specific skills, there's a lot of depth here for a system that you rarely have the chance to utilize.

Investigating the creation system reveals another compelling, yet ultimately unnecessary, facet to the game. Each character can craft items, food, armor, or even enchant weapons with timed bonuses. Again, like an MMORPG, there is an emphasis on disposable resources—a problem for online games because of constant item generation—but in Infinite Undiscovery, it was hard not to ask why the items weren't irreplaceable. Perhaps the producers weren't taking ques from MMOs; after all, they never confessed to a connection

The story of Infinite Undiscovery concerns a whiny young flute player named Capell who looks remarkably similar to a legendary swordsman. Capell is locked up in a prison for crimes he hasn't committed, and is freed by one of the swordsman's associates—the aforementioned Aya. When Capell teams up with his doppelganger, Lord

Sigmund, and a small group of rebels, he finds out what everyone is determined to right with the world. The moon has been chained by the Order of Chains, and as a result, everyone is suffering.

Sadly, the rest of the tale plays out with terrible voice acting at a stammering pace. After spending so much time and energy crafting such a rich visual world, it's a real shame that the game is released as is: performed at the level of a high-school play. Or worse. The cut scenes have no dignity. This is not the sort of film that anyone would watch, nor the kind of book that anyone would read. The lamentable direction absolutely mars what may have been a charming game under more capable (or perhaps well-financed) hands. The voice acting highlights silly artifacts that litter the game, like heroes that sleep in full armor, or the way every character speaks through clenched teeth, often with no mouth movement of any kind. Better acting might have let us forgive these moments, but sometimes the weakest choices drag down the whole design.

I want to love this game, but I can't. I really love JRPGs. I love action movies, too. But the fact is, if every action film for the last twenty years was about a guy trapped in a building filled with terrorists, then none of us would enjoy them anymore. Action movies evolved, from the cool roguishness of early Bond films, to the hulking manimals typified by Rambo...to the John McClain everyman in over his head. Soon after, the genre embraced and explored the action hero at home, with films like *Kindergarten Cop* or *Face/Off*, due to the social pressures of "Family Values," and now, in the wake of 9/11, we're saturated with superheroism.

JRPGs are as empty as action movies, but instead of evolution, we've been stuck with the same mistaken identities and love triangles for the last fifteen years. The heroes are still young boys with girlish faces who scream out their ridiculous-sounding attacks during combat. Most of the enemies still draw from the same Celtic/Western fantasy traditions, and we're still fetching "five of these water crystals to progress." Why not an old man hero? Why not magic based in literature passages, or psychological conditions? Wouldn't it be interesting if our thirty-year-old salary man adventurer was casting "Obsessive Compulsive Disorder!" on enemies? The biggest shift in JRPGS has come from MMORPG influence and the AI settings of FFXII...both of which have affected Infinite Undiscovery for the better

Thing is, if you love a genre, you want everyone to fall in love with it. I sit down with friends and force them to watch action movies, because I want to share my passion. If I did the same with JRPGs, I'd only be able to show them a few significant examples; the rest would be retread. That doesn't mean I don't like JRPGS, it just means that there are fewer instances of real revolution.

And that lack of innovation is brought into sharper focus when a game promises a brand-new experience. Infinite Undiscovery doesn't fall short of what JRPGS have done before, but in the light of revolutionary titles like Final Fantasy XII, it disappoints.

Or to put it another way, when a game promises you *anything*, you expect a little more.

parting shot

A fun action game, sunk by terrible acting, an all-too-familiar script, and laborious pacing.

"Under all the shiny cars and spectacular vistas, the silent soliloquy of physics that unites car and driver is what determines a racing game's true value."

BAJA

Edge of Control

Run for the border

Words Dave Halverson

Among the core genres that make up the videogame collective, racing games rank among the most specialized. Where most genres are fairly easy to delineate, the defining characteristics of a racing simulation are buried deep within the code. Under all of the shiny cars and spectacular vistas, the silent soliloquy of physics that unites car and driver is what determines a racing game's true value. The devil is in the details, too, only he has borne a brood and formed a posse. Authentic handling characteristics as they apply to variable terrain, engine noise, weight displacement, oversteer and gear ratios are as paramount to racing purists as they are incidental to the typical Sunday driver who just wants to put pedal to metal and have a blast. Make it too real and Joe Sunday heaves the controller, but make it too "arcadey" and you risk losing the kind of credibility and enthusiasts spread like tear-offs in a mud rally.

After six MX-versus-ATV hybrids, nobody knows this quite as well as 2XL chief designer Robb Rinard, which is why you won't find any motorcycles in Baja: Edge of Control, even though they've dominated 30 of the series' 41 races since 1967. The fact that 2XL decided to ditch bikes (and ATVs) to focus their efforts on achieving a Gran Turismo-level simulation says as much about their dedication as it does about THQ's fortitude and resolve to afford them the freedom. It's rare these days that we find a major publisher willing to back a developer's vision instead of simply issuing a diktat, and this was a major decision. I almost blew a gasket when I heard there were no bikes in the game. I've ridden in my share of desert scrambles, but Baja is the Super Bowl of Enduros, so the idea of a virtual re-creation really hit home, as I'm sure it has or will with anyone even vaguely familiar with the annual event.

Saddling up on the Malcolm Smith Husqvarna that I watched dominate the race as a kid sure would have been nice, but not at the expense of delivering the ultimate off-road racing opus, which, after three years and hundreds of physics-laden miles later, is exactly what they've delivered.

Is Baja: Edge of Control as good a racing game as Gran Turismo 5? In my opinion, absolutely, but in a completely different way. The two games complement each other more than they draw comparison. It all boils down to preference, really, but there's no question that Baja is the Gran Turismo of off-road racing. GT5 will forever reign in overall presentation (it has its own cable TV network, for shit's sake), but what Baja lacks in shiny superfluousness, it way overcompensates for in size, depth, navigation and a little thing called the Baja 1000: a 300-mile, four-hour-long version of the world's greatest off-road race, as in 300 real-world miles of continuous, wide-open, point-to-point racing that never loads. The Baja Race mode spans the entire Peninsula, with three approximately 60-minute legs of the Baja 250 winding through San Felipe, Ensenada and Sky Ranch, and two legs of the 500 (Cabo and the Score Baja 500) coming in at around 90 minutes each. That's 10 hours of real-world open racing through Mexico…per

Hill climbs really put your skills to the test.

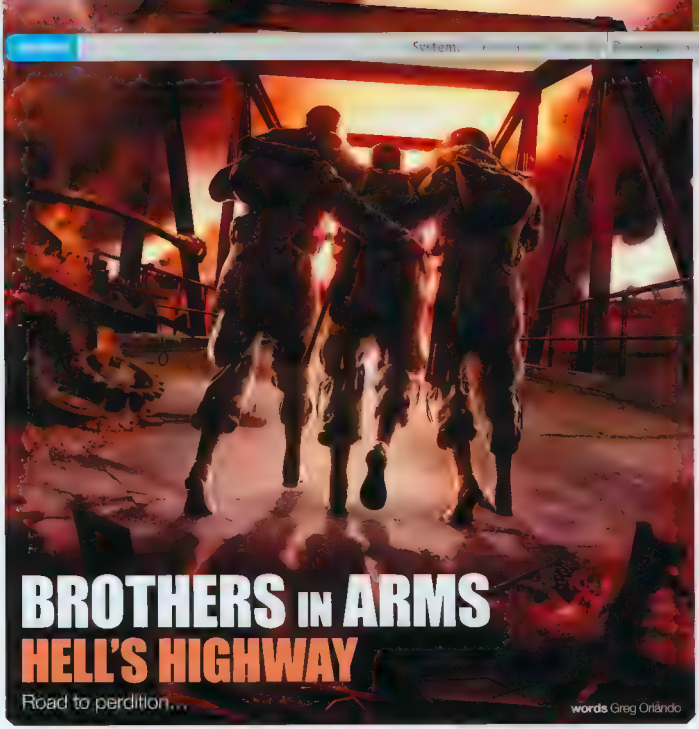
vehicle class, a single mode that spans 90 hours. And that's barely the appetizer. The Race menu alone offers Rally, Hill Climb, Open Class, Baja Race and Free Ride competitions, each a full-fledged circuit unto itself. To get an idea of how meticulously 2XL labored over every aspect of the game, spend a few minutes playing around in Free Ride. Great physics on the track are one thing, but when you can roll onto the shoreline and see the ripples slowly folding onto the sand or hit a Palo Verde tree 50 yards from nowhere and it bends and pushes you back in exacting fashion, it really puts things in perspective, especially taking into account that the same level of detail applies to hundreds of square miles of open desert topography.

At the heart of it all, Baja Career is where it all comes together: A desert rat's dusty dream come true, where the mother lode of racing circuits awaits in vehicles ranging from the 80-horsepower Baja Bug to the 800-horsepower Trophy Truck, sandwiched between Unlimited VW, 4x4, Open Wheel, Mini Truck, Fullsize Truck, and Class 1 Ltd. (and when all that dust settles, the coolest bonus vehicles on the planet). There are two ways to make money in Baja. Edge of Control, by placing in the top three or via contingency sponsorship, whereby various corporations pay you cash money to plaster their logo all over your panels—the only catch being you've got to cross the finish with them still attached to the car. You can call the support chopper for mechanical repairs, but they don't carry duct tape, so play nice. Earning credits allows you to buy new vehicles and modify the one you've got in the game's streamlined, easy-in-easy-out parts interface, storing each passing vehicle in your garage (to utilize elsewhere in the game at your discretion) as you progress. You can go as far as fine-tuning shock rebound and bounce, brake bias and gear ratios, or stick with presets: manage your oil pressure, tires, brakes, shocks and clutch or turn them all off. The

level of simulation is almost entirely user defined. You can even lock down the camera—simply click the right analog stick when you find your sweet spot and there it stays. This is one game that I can say truly has it all: the gamut of online and multiplayer components, a perfectly suited narrative/tutorial and interface, dynamic audio, awesome video segments, tons of achievements and unlockables, and who knows how many other nuggets buried under all that desert (there's gotta be an old Hodaka Wombat or two under all that sand). And not an ounce of it at the expense of the core game, which happens to be groundbreaking.

parting shot

Baja: Edge of Control is the biggest, most all-inclusive off-road racing game on four wheels. Adjustable simulation levels make for a wonderfully personalized experience. The level of real-world authenticity is unmatched, and 2XL breaks new ground delivering three versions of the legendary Baja Enduro in one-to-four-hour-long sections, along with hundreds of hours of circuit racing, variations on eight vehicle classes and eight-player online.



BROTHERS IN ARMS
HELL'S HIGHWAY

Road to perdition...

words Greg Orlando

World War II has been a godsend for game makers. Not to belittle the horrible events of the war, but it's fertile ground ripe with expansionistic villains (Germany, Japan) and a moral high ground for the protagonist.

The first-person Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway, initially, seems to be one more for the pile. Yet developer Gearbox does its able best to distinguish Highway from the Calls of Duty and the Medals of Honor, the Commandos, and the Castle Wolfensteins.

Hell's Highway centers on an Allied defeat, the little known Operation Market Garden. It was an attempt to seize and hold a pathway from Holland straight into Germany, a move that would have dramatically shortened the war in Europe. The game doesn't offer some grand triumphant crushing of the Axis, and can only focus on the tiny battles, the one-foot-at-a-time slog through hostile terrain.

Here, Highway presents a series of skirmishes with the intent of at least hinting what true war is like. The game offers opportunities for run-and-gun play, but only for those inclined toward multiple restarts. Battles are meant to be strategic, with keeping under cover the primary (if not the only) rule for survival. The Germans, whatever else they are, are efficient killers. A few seconds in the open and the player's hero Sergeant Baker will be a bullet-ridden corpse.

"As a more cerebral take on the standard, brain-dead World War II shooter, Highway soars..."

Each map presents its own puzzle. As a squad leader, players can issue commands to their soldiers, moving them around and ordering them to fire on targets. The idea here is to make the enemy soldiers keep their heads down; an icon indicates how suppressed (harried and able to shoot back) an individual is. Suppression makes it easier for friendly troops to maneuver around the battlefield without dying. The goal then, is to find good flanking points, or spots within range of the heavy weaponry: a mortar, machine guns, or bazooka.

As a more cerebral take on the standard, brain-dead World War II shooter, Highway soars, but the point-and-click nature of squad commands and a tendency of the game's artificial intelligence to interpret orders proves frustrating during firefights. Sometimes, inexplicably, a squad of soldiers will expose themselves to enemy fire, unnecessarily moving in front of a barricade before leaping over it to find cover. Other times, they'll move to what seems to be a perfectly wonderful piece of cover—and then stand right out in the open.

The game also offers up one of the cardinal sins of game development in its use of cut-scenes. At one point, players are ordered to hunt down a sniper, an enemy established as a persistent foe in a previous cut-scene. Players are made to navigate through a series of cramped quarters of a church, battling Germans at close range. After a series of extended shootouts involving wooden plank bridges and destructible pews, players finally reach their target—and the game deftly moves to a cut-scene of the sniper being dispatched. Any sort of accomplishment at having reached the goal is excised by the game's unwillingness to let players finish what they started. It's hubris 101 courtesy of Gearbox.

parting shot

Shooting Adolf Hitler's goons will never get old. It's good that now and again, game developers are at least a little thoughtful about it.

Mercenaries 2
World in Flames

Let it burn ...

words Greg Orlando

For all those seeking to waste their lives on the drudgery of a 9-to-5 existence as Johnny Punchclock or Sarah Lunchpail, we say, *Do not do it!* Instead, we highly recommend traveling to Venezuela, where, inexplicably, huge pallets of money are simply lying around everywhere. We repeat: huge pallets of money

Venezuela also has a lot of oil. It, too, is just lying around, in huge containers. Apparently, like the money, it's free. You can just walk right up and throw a smoke grenade to tell your helicopter pilot (you'll need one) to come and ferry it away for you

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames presents a somewhat, uh, stylized version of Venezuela. But its heart, certainly, is in the right place. The game offers balls-out, third-person adventuring as one of three mercenaries seeking to take down a no-goodnik dictator

Open-ended play allows for exploration and mayhem in suitably enormous chunks. The Venezuela presented here, although not overtly realistic, is massive, sprawling across cities and war zones and jungles and the Orinoco river. Players are free to do as they will, hopping across the embattled South American country in the quest for their ultimate target.

There's a lot to see, do and wreck. As mercenaries complete missions, they'll be able to recruit allies to the cause. A helicopter pilot can provide airdrops and carry away goodies. A mechanic crafts new vehicles. A jet fighter ace can drop death from the skies, blowing up tanks, buildings and enemy emplacements with cluster bombs and tactical nukes. Sometimes, though, it's good to forego all the extras and simply slug it out with the enemy mano a mano. This game is certainly good like that.

Mercenaries, on the road to revenge, can seek out aid and comfort from one of five different factions, including a rebel army, the Chinese, a faux United Nations and a heartless oil conglomerate. Cozying up to one side often means alienating another, and players will oftentimes need to walk a tightrope to ensure they don't burn bridges. Factions provide missions and information. They're a lifeline for cash and destructive goodies

The faction-based mechanic adds a lot to Mercenaries. Wander into the jungles and the rebels will be slugging it out with government forces. Head into the cities and the oil company will beg for aid as the Venezuelan army encroaches on its territory. Everywhere there are firefights, burnt-out vehicles, screams of war. It's a neat bit that makes the game world ring true: This really is a world in flames.

Best of all, the game is smart enough to keep its tongue in its cheek. After the female mercenary takes a bullet in her rear, she becomes—naturally—the butt of jokes from her associates, and the other faction leaders harp on the wound constantly. At one point, the mercenaries must take a respite from the slaughtering to drive the "car of death" in a goofy Moon Patrol-esque minigame. It's a wonderful life, this cutthroat existence.

parting shot

Go forth, young mercenaries, and destroy.

de Blob

Color me impressed

words Dave Halverson

De Blob jiggled to life as The Blob when nine students of the Netherlands Utrecht School of the Arts were assigned the task of creating an interactive game to demonstrate what the city of Utrecht's station area would look like after a 10-year renovation project, so that passersby would be compelled to ogle the demo to see the architects' vision for the plaza. Little did they know (or maybe they did) that their funky little blob would earn them World Wide Web accolades, and ultimately roll itself all the way to the big show via a full-fledged Wii game, courtesy of THQ.

Not to take anything away from the concept's original architects (they did in four months in their spare time what few ever accomplish), but looking at the downloadable PC demo, as clever as it may be, I would never have imagined it becoming anything more than a jolly little novelty game, which is what 90 percent of today's game publishers would have turned it into. But THQ saw the painting on the wall and dialed up Aussie subsidiary Blue Tongue to give The Blob a major makeover, and have they ever—beginning with the Blob itself, transforming it from a goofy Toejam & Earl reject into a gelatinous devil with some serious spunk. Then all they needed was a purpose. Enter Planet Raydia's Chroma City, the color-drenched world of the Graydians, a high-spirited race of peculiarly proportioned paint people fighting for their lives against the invading INKT forces, led by the diminutive but ever maniacal Comrade Black, on a campaign to erase color from the galaxy and bring about an era of INKT prosperity through a silent gray world.

As Black's legions spread like Necromongers, draining color from village to dell, our absorbent hero springs to action, coming to the aid of four Graydians: Bif (the muscle), Zip (the field operative), Arty (the color coordinator) and Prof (the brains), who form the Color Underground. With de Blob as their instrument of destruction (so to speak), they vow to free the enslaved Graydians, return color to Chroma City and end the tyranny of Comrade Black.

Slamming and Paintbots

Eleven areas of Chroma City stand between de Blob and said goal, each a pale, grayscale version of its former self. Although the basic objective is simple—paint as much of each city sector as possible in the allotted time—the formula for doing so is nothing short of genius, especially taking into account that the simple act of "painting" (Blob actually coats whole surfaces with color graffiti by a single touch) is so addictive that de Blob rehab centers are likely to become the new darling of the VH1 reality deluge. The way Blob's physics commingle with the Wiimote and nunchuk relative to the progressively mesmeric level design make wall rolling, jumping, braking and "smashing" (Blob's method of attack) too much damn fun.

Although you begin each level with 10 or 15 minutes on the clock, de Blob isn't a timed game. Entering each level, comprised of a number of sectors, you're presented with an overall goal from Prof, followed by various challenges as they pertain to Bif, Arty and Zip. Bif is in charge of liberating landmarks, destroying Inky soldiers, and eliminating INKT ordnance like Inky tanks, turrets and jet bikes. Arty issues painting orders (and I dare you to give up on a single one) and Zip leads the way to new positions and the heat of battle. Completing challenges earns you both time and, if you complete it on the first attempt, color energy. You also earn time by freeing Graydians (by painting an entire block) and by slamming Inky soldiers and artillery. Inky forces shoot ink that eliminates Blob's color and slowly drains his paint points until he either finds water (to cleanse) or dies. They're easily squished but get progressively more tenacious as the rebellion ensues. The sectors themselves are a platformer's dream, filled end to end with vertical elements and items (such as new paint patterns) to reach; some easily and some by pure skill and tenacity.

Blobology

It only takes a few challenges to open each sector gate to slam the exit pool, but new challenges appear as you complete them, so the better you play, the more time you get, and the more area you color, the greater the reward, making the experience not only addicting, but completely user defined. To 100-percent complete a given world, you'll need to paint all of the trees and billboards, liberate every landmark, paint any blimps, collect all of the color energy and style items, liberate every Graydian, and clear every challenge, so that 10-minute start time could end up a 70-plus-minute sortie. Skilled players will find themselves carefully managing their time between free painting, completing challenges and eliminating INKT forces, while reserving as much time as possible to color those hard-to-reach areas, and less experienced or hurried players can simply head for the sector gate as time winds down or as they see fit. Either way, Blue Tongue have stocked each area with ample one-ups to encourage pushing it to the limit.

What's kept me glued is an insatiable need to free every Graydian, paint every gray surface, and flush out every INK-polluted waterway because I actually care about the Graydians as much as I want to paint Comrade Black's backside red. I'm not one to "clean out" a game unless it's exceptional in every way or stars a picture-perfect heroine, but the combination of near Pixar-quality CGI, impeccable character and world design, and self-motivating gameplay kept me playing from dusk to dawn. How many races of rambunctious paint balls that like to rock-out and party (and judging by all of the little ones, procreation) can you name? And villains don't get any cooler than the über-militant, hilariously sadistic Comrade Black. Without just the right combination of wit, funk and cartoon verve, I wouldn't bat an eye, but the art direction and script couldn't be more dead-on. The music, which not only defines Blob's mood but builds in concert with uninterrupted coloring, is mostly great, too (Euphoric is cool but Blissful is the stickiest), and the overall length, or shall we say girth, can only be described as humongous. In addition to each world's story level, there are two more (voluntary) levels, and I lost count of the number of extras I've uncovered…Blob Parties, secret missions, multiplayer maps, movies, you name it. And for once we get an ending worth fighting for, on the heels of a final combat mission you won't soon forget.

> "...the better you play, the more time you get, and the more area you color, the greater the reward, making the experience not only addicting but completely user defined."

To plunge deeper into the game's underbelly would take ages, and could get messy. There's just so much nuance, care and skillful balancing woven into each area, you really need to experience it for yourself. I can say unequivocally, however, that de Blob is among the top five best-looking Wii games out there and the most fun I've had with the Wii Remote & Nunchuk so far. ...Must be the way I roll.

parting shot

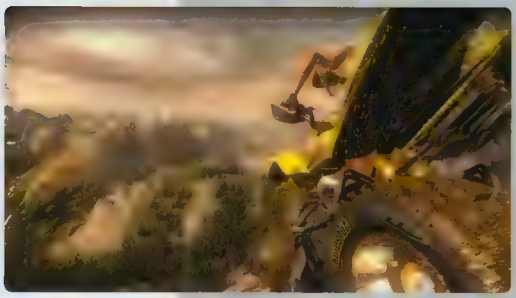
As hypnotic as it is challenging, to call de Blob original or innovative would be an understatement. The way that Blue Tongue manage the gameplay relative to a player's skill, determination and personal preference is inspiring, and the art style is indicative of Japan's heyday. If de Blob was touted as the next big thing from Nintendo, you'd think Miyamoto and Co. got their mojo back.

System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC | **Developer:** Blackrock Studio | **Publisher:** Disney Int. | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** September 16

Pure

This flight is now boarding

words Dave Halverson



"The airborne antics are so intense, your seat should also be used as a flotation device..."

The basic philosophy behind crafting a great racing game hasn't changed since we ogled the technological wonder of Atari 5200 Pole Position. Whether it's Gran Turismo, Moto GP or Mario Kart, developers have been making the simple act of going around a track faster than the competition as entertaining as time, money and hardware would allow for a very long time...until one day, the technology finally surpassed the basic philosophy and they all went a little insane. After so many years of tit for tat, sacrificing features to make others work, when they finally got surplus tech, they started spending memory on anything that could be put together so they could blow it apart, creating sprawling carPGs, combat zones and crash simulators, some of which are better insurance videos than videogames.

I'll take all the Need for Speeds and Full Autos they roll my way (if they ever wake up and start building them around motorcycle culture), but I miss my finessed, arcade-style racing franchises something fierce. A simulation can only be as good as how well a particular studio interprets defined physical parameters. But the trademark characteristics that define a great arcade-style racing franchise rely on pure fabrication, the essence of escaping reality. You can strip a game like Ridge Racer or Daytona to the bone and racing game fans would still recognize them instantly, based on their signature style. Pure is cut from that same cloth, only not as much by exaggeration as presentation. The airborne antics are so intense, your seat should also be used as a flotation device, but elsewhere, the way Blackrock Studio frame the action and animate the game's four distinct racers give it a look all its own, complimented by the kind of sticky gameplay that makes you want to shave precious seconds off of your lap times, explore every shortcut and master every track, which, by arcade-style-racing standards, would normally take all of a few hours....

In generations past (as they refer to game consoles), the word "next" has always been used in the literal sense. After the PlayStation ran its course, the PS2 came *next*. So once it came out, it couldn't be next anymore. It was current, it had arrived. Somebody better call Webster's, because the new meaning seems to be "ultimate" or "superior." And I guess I can buy that, as long as publishers and developers play the way Disney/Blackrock have with Pure. There's nothing extraordinary about creating a superior version of an existing archetype, pumping it up with bigger tracks, real-time dirt accumulation, beautiful visuals and a monster air system that provides cheek-flapping boost, but when you tack on event-specific quad creation that takes you from bare frame to every last decal and spread it over a multinational World Tour with shiny new freestyle, sprint and race events (the freestyle specifically is completely original)—well, that's next, as in ultimate, or maybe just Pure.

parting shot

The enormity and complexity of a big sim and the control and finesse of a great arcade racing franchise combine for a double dose of dirty fun. All that's missing is rider apparel, although I really don't miss it. Two guys, two girls, lotsa dirt—I'm good.

Disgaea 3: Absence of Justice

Now with Magichange!

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that there's a 99% chance that Disgaea 3 is a transitional game in the series, built from the ground up for PS3… only using a PS2 blueprint. To suggest otherwise would infer that Disgaea 3 is indicative of the series' final next-generation transformation, which would be heart-breaking news for a series so beloved and boiling over with possibilities. As much as I can't get enough of Disgaea's character designs, witty banter, rampant backstabbing and backwards hierarchy, it's time for the graphics to catch up to the gameplay. The days of the cubic islands floating in a sea of nothingness have passed. It's time to land, and let these beautiful sprites run free on lush normal-mapped vistas basted in babbling brooks, grandiose castles, and shiny marble temples. It's also time we get to control those beautiful hi-res characters we've been ogling in the subtext for all these years too. Then and only then will the transition be complete! In the meantime there's no better way to celebrate the passing of the torch than Disgaea 3: Absence of Justice.

Dark Assembly's out, Homeroom is in, and The Nether Institute Dark Academy is now in session. As much as I thought I'd miss Laharl and that he'd be impossible to replace, my separation anxiety lasted all of 5 minutes. Laharl hated his father the Overlord like a good boy, and might even have punched his card, or at least had the Prinny's do it; but he got off easy when Dad choked on a pastry. Mao's ambition is to defeat (as in kill) his father (coincidentally also the Overlord) in battle. Time for school! Being the No. 1 honor student at the Evil Academy comes easy for Mao. In the Netherworld bad is good, and good is bad… Ditch class, enslave lesser demons, disrespect the teacher whenever possible (when you are in class) and cause as much chaos as possible, and reap the rewards; showing up for class, paying attention, studying hard, and being respectful will not be tolerated. It's fun to be Mao! … Until he discovers that the only path to a duel with his Dad, and subsequent dominion over all, is by becoming a hero, which for a demon is no easy task. Time to hit the books! Mao is soon joined by Raspberyl (but you can call her Beryl), the No. 1 delinquent at Evil Academy. She's never late, always does her homework, and is the model student and she owes it all to Mao, since she got that way by doing the exact opposite of everything Mao does. Like Etna and Laharl they become fast friends, although also like Etna and Laharl their intentions may not be 100% honorable. Mao's other new best buddy is Almaz, the crown prince of dunderheads; both human and a hero… for a while at least.

On the battlefield things are pretty much as you left them… throwing is still the key tactic and Geo Effects are now in session, only no longer controlled by triangular speed-bumps (hence all of those blocks). Puzzle elements ensue. The biggest tweak in strategy, however, comes by way of "Magichange," which may sound like a late-night infomercial for an outpatient sex-change, but it's for monsters silly! Monsters (are wicked cool) but can't throw in Disgaea, so Nippon Ichi is throwing them a nice big rotten bone for the low-low price of bringing one less grunt into battle with Magichange by which the monster becomes a weapon and the selected character gets to use some neat-o Magichange skills. Sounds weird but when the chips are down it's the ticket. It's not easy being good to become a delinquent so that you can kill your father, but with hard work and determination anything is possible.

Still a sight for sore eyes…but so much harsh on the hardware.

> "It's time to land, and let these beautiful sprites run free"

parting shot

Disgaea 3 is the ultimate version of the current formula—a formula that beyond this game, is in need of a true current-generation overhaul. Until then, Absence of Justice will put a smile on your face and a demon in your heart. Mao is great—maybe even Laharl great, but Beryl is no Etna. Fortunately the game is packed with cuties, and Magichange adds a cool new wrinkle. Now we wait!

System: PS2 | Developer: Amusement Vision | Publisher: Sega | Multi: None | ESRB: Mature | Available

Yakuza 2

Kazuma Kiryu and the Prefecture of Doom

words Casey Loe

Like a movie sequel rushed into production to cash in on a surprise hit, Yakuza 2 was cranked out in less than a year. It took another two years for it to find its way here, but the game still has that rushed hit-movie sequel feel: It's packed with reused assets and questionable story points, but its lengthier quest and expertly directed event scenes reflect Yakuza's new status as one of Sega's most important Japanese franchises.

Yakuza 2 improves only modestly on its predecessor, but one of those changes—the dramatic reduction of Yakuza 1's lengthy load times—makes playing it a significantly more pleasant experience. Yakuza 2 also features dozens if not hundreds of flashy new "Heat Attack" finishing moves that can be done in conjunction with weapons and NPC partners, a new leveling-up system that works as a skill tree of sorts, and the ability to do back-attacks right off the bat, which keeps foes from cheaply ganging up on you. The list of improvements pretty much ends there, however. The rest of the original Yakuza's flaws are in full effect, with wonky perspectives that often have you running straight toward the camera or fighting unseen enemies, a crude interface that forces players to waste time on tedious inventory management, and plenty of random enemy encounters that are set at such an easy difficulty level that they add nothing in the way of tension or entertainment to the game. These flaws don't sink the game by any means, but they were common complaints of the first Yakuza and it's disappointing to not see them resolved in the sequel.

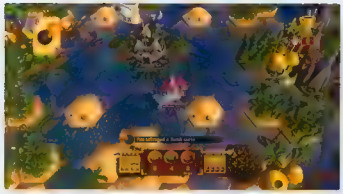
Adding to the impression that Yakuza 2 would perhaps better be titled "Yakuza 1.5" is the fact that it reuses just about everything from its predecessor. You'll walk the same Kamurocho streets as the same hero, wearing the same clothes, visiting the same Tojo Clan compounds and fighting the same random thugs wearing the same mysterious "FART" sweatshirts. But Yakuza 2 also adds two new hub towns in Japan's western capital of Osaka, and dozens of new battlefield areas. There's more new content than old, and the combination of the two cities makes for a longer main quest than the original game had, with infinitely more side-quest options. The sheer volume of minigames and side-quests is perhaps the most striking change in Yakuza 2, transforming the game from a focused mission with short diversions to something closer to an open world. Some of the side-quests are queerly fascinating, like being able to take a job in a Japanese host club (where women pay *you* for companionship), while others, like the ability to play several variants of mah-jongg, will be completely incomprehensible to most Western players.

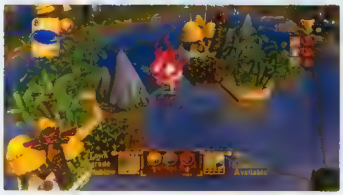
The thing that made the original Yakuza great was its story, and there's mixed news to report on that front. Yakuza 2 lacks the focused central mystery of its predecessor, tries too hard to shoehorn in all the characters from the original, and veers into the realm of self-ridicule with some very silly plot twists. Its central theme of "east versus west" doesn't exactly play too well in English, either, where the differences in dialect, style, and personality between Tokyo gangsters and Osaka gangsters will fly right over the heads of all but the most studied Japanophiles. On the other hand, the story is fast-paced, cinematic, and is both well acted in Japanese and well translated in English (unlike the original Yakuza, this game has subtitles instead of a dub, and is probably better for it). The event scenes have greatly improved character models and animation and are directed with great flair. The real-time PS2 graphics won't impress anyone who has spent any time with a next-gen system, but the pacing and direction always make them fun to watch.

Yakuza 2 offers a longer quest and plenty of diversions on the side, but lacks the tight storytelling of its predecessor, and its impact is significantly diminished by both a lack of new features and competition from far flashier next-gen games. But if you were a big enough fan of the original to be interested in a fun but derivative sequel—say, the Yakuza equivalent of *Die Hard 2: Die Harder*—you won't be disappointed.

parting shot

Yakuza 2 should please existing fans who are hungry for more, but newbies should instead hit the bargain bins for the more inspired original.





System: Xbox 360/XBLA, PS3/PSN | **Developer:** Certain Affinity | **Publisher:** Capcom | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** TBA

Age of Booty

Mutinous good fun

No offense to developer Certain Affinity or Capcom, but making a fun pirate-themed game is almost, but not quite, like shooting fish in a barrel.

With the downloadable real-time strategy Age of Booty, players take the role of a pirate commander, navigating a ship across hexagonally tiled seas. These seas are rife with booty: cargo containers for the plunder, villages for the sacking, towns for the capture and merchants for the sinking. Players must seize and hold a number of towns to achieve victory.

A home port provides repairs and, with enough resources, ship improvements. Warfare takes place in real time, ensuring players will be frantically racing around without pause, zipping from their controlled cities to defend themselves, and to their base when their ship is damaged. At once, Age of Booty becomes an exercise in priorities. Defend or attack? Harvest resources? Spend said resources on upgraded cannons, sails or hull strength?

Nonaligned merchant ships glide across the seas, and these ships become strategic targets. Each, when sunk, releases a curse. Some cough up bombs that can be used to soften up enemy targets; it's great fun to drop one on a tile adjacent to two enemy warships assaulting a friendly base. Other curses unleash powerful typhoons that sweep enemies away, or give players the ability to plunder resources from opponents' ships. Learning to employ these curses smartly is crucial in these sail-or-sink skirmishes.

The game is at its best when it drops players in a three-team war for supremacy. Here, the game often ups the ante, requiring five towns to be held for victory, or instituting a time limit. Here, the need for prioritizing is all important. Booty, it seems, won't claim itself without good strategy.

Age of Booty is fleshed out with a map editor, allowing players to create their own worlds. Capcom is touting extra content for the game in the form of expansion packs and new maps. The maps will likely be free. The expansions will most certainly not be free.

No matter: There's enough here to warrant the initial purchase—and then some. Booty serves as a fine example that games don't have to be complicated to be enthralling. This simple game has enough juice—or rum, whatever—to keep players hooked on its seven-scenario single-player mode. Multiplayer mode, supporting eight players, promises epic warfare.

And, for the record, the sentiment expressed by the Pirates of the Caribbean ride is, in fact, true. *Yo, ho, ho. A pirate's life for me.* **Greg Orlando**

parting shot

The lyrics for A Pirate's Life for me includes the following stanza:

"We're beggars and blighters and ne'er-do-well cads.
Drink up me 'earties, Yo Ho!
Aye! But we're loved by our mommies and dads!
Drink up me 'earties, Yo Ho!"

System: xbox 360 PS3 **Developer:** Electronic Arts **Publisher:** Electronic Arts | **ESRB:** T **Available:** September 2

Facebreaker

Losing face, one round at a time

Facebreaker is the Chuck Wepner of boxing videogames.

This, for the uninitiated, is not exactly a good thing.

Wepner, who fought Muhammad Ali in 1975, was the inspiration for Sylvester Stallone's Rocky. Although Wepner was a boxer of some talent, he was perhaps best known for his colorful nickname: The Bayonne Bleeder.

Electronic Arts' Facebreaker will likely be known for its colorful title. It's certainly catchy and reflects the, uh, face-breaking nature of its action. Beyond that, sadly, the game is eminently forgettable

Facebreaker presents over-the-top boxing complete with throws, special attacks such as a bad-breath beating, bone-breaking hits, and exaggeratedly wacky fighters such as the obese and asthmatic ninja Steve. The idea is to score three knockouts or string together enough punches to be able to do a one-hit kill "facebreaker." Matches last three rounds, but never go to the scorecards. If no one wins after three rounds, both fighters square off in sudden death to win by scoring one knockout.

A rock-paper-scissors mechanic powers the brawling. Strong attacks go right through blocks, blocks are effective against jabs and hooks, and quick punches are a surefire counter for more powerful hits. Although this effectively lends a strategic hook (pardon the pun) to the proceedings, Facebreaker fights quickly dissolve into a mess of button mashing. The game doesn't recognize boxer fatigue, so artificial-intelligence-controlled pugilists are free to wale away at a blurring pace. The best defense is a furious offensive. Responding to flying fists of fury with even more furious fist-flying is the best way to win; strategy be damned.

Facebreaker fares somewhat better as a party game. Its action is cartoonish enough to be irreverent; boxers leap, dive, teleport and hammer each other with huge sweeping overhand punches. At the end of a round, they mug for the camera, their faces ridiculously swollen and bruised. The brawlers are goofy enough to be endearing: Electronic Arts serves up a burly voodoo shaman, an oversize and weapons-laden Russian, and sort-of celebrities Heidi Montag and Kim Kardashian, among others.

A neat create-a-boxer mode allows players to scan their own faces and plaster them on boxers. This, then, is a good reason to go headhunting against friends; a win by facebreaker allows the victorious boxer to capture the losing fighter's head as a trophy. It's the ultimate in bragging rights and a fine reason to slug it out. Mr. Wepner would be pleased **Greg Orlando**

parting shot

Chuck Wepner knocked Muhammad Ali down in the 9th round of their fight. Go figure.

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System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Tomy | **Publisher:** Atlus | **Multi:** None | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** Sept

Zoids Assault

A strategy stretch

I have no idea what possessed Atlus to localize every low-budget Xbox 360 SRPG ever released in Japan, but, well, here you go: The third and final shot in Atlus' flurry of shovelware is Zoids Assault, and like previous releases Spectral Force 3 and Operation: Darkness, it falls somewhere between disappointment and disaster.

You control a team of five Zoids, doglike mechs (based on a line of Japanese toys) that look so similar that you'll need to manually recolor them to tell them apart. Your team battles others Zoids in standard SRPG fashion, with each character moving and then attacking or using an ability when its turn rolls around. The missions come one after another with no freedom to choose a path or engage in side-quests, so your only recourse when you lose one is to withdraw and try again. Normally I would appreciate Zoids Assault's high level of challenge, but having to replay the battles is a tedious experience, since there's no way to turn off the battle animations and everything on the battlefield has a ton of hit points. Add in some generous healing abilities and you can easily spend 10 minutes on a turn, in which nothing is actually accomplished on either side of the battlefield.

Zoids Assault does get a little more interesting between battles, when you can equip not just weapons and armor but a variety of skills that offer meaningful customization options. And it does have a clear, simple and useful interface. But outside of those pleasant features, it offers fewer options, less content and no more depth than a typical DS mech strategy game like Front Mission or Atlus' own Drone Tactics. Retailing at twice the price, that's simply inexcusable. **Casey Loe**

parting shot

Zoids Assault is a no-frills strategy game built with limited ambition, limited imagination, and a very limited budget. For $60, I expect more than mere competence.

System: Xbox360 | **Developer:** Rare | **Publisher:** Microsoft | **Multi:** 1-2 | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Sept. 2

Viva Piñata:

Party hearty...

It may be the apex of insanity to sit in front of the moron box, controller in hand, guiding the actions of virtual party favors for hours. Sad piñatas in a would-be garden paradise need candy to bolster—no lie—their "candiosity." Horny piñatas need to be guided to one another to do a "romance dance" and spawn. Plants need tending, their fallen flowers need collection and removal lest they clutter up the garden. Stinky piles of red doots (not feces, but rather sour candies) want smashing, lest they poison the residents. Sick piñatas require medical treatment. The rather surly and destructive Professor Pester demands to be countered.

Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise should come with a water cooler. In many ways, it's a job.

Paradise is also a simulation masquerading as a cheery children's game with the potential to greedily consume hours or perhaps days of a human life. Its addictive charm cannot be denied; managing the actions of papier-mâché animals in a bucolic (or frenzied) garden can become like electronic crack, minus the nasty and unfortunate heart explosions.

A sequel to Viva Piñata, Paradise does not muck with the formula too much. Players are tasked with creating a safe haven for all sorts of virtual insects, birds and mammals. They're given tools to shape the garden and then largely left to their own devices. It's this freedom that's ultimately liberating and alienating: The goal of the game is to attract more piñatas and buy more stuff to attract more piñatas to ensure the snake eats its own tail.

Wonderful discoveries await: A mine reveals a spectacular and mysterious one-of-a-kind piñata egg. A rather unremarkable Taffly piñata can be exposed to flame and turned into a new kind of creature. A gem tree seed, planted, watered and properly fertilized, will produce strange fruit. Feeding odd foods to piñatas can alter their coloring and goofy clothes can modify their behaviors. Paradise offers these goodies at every turn, demanding that players try everything in order to see what happens.

Caveat emptor, though: The game is dense and often unforgiving. Players are given little in the way of guidance or even hints as to what function many of the items in the game perform. Beloved piñatas can be sickened, smashed or eaten. It also puts an arbitrary limit on the amount of stuff the garden can hold, even if seemingly huge chunks of the space are empty. Constant juggling will be required to make room for plants, trees and creatures, which severely dents the idea of the player as god of the garden. At times, in fact, players will seem less like God and more like a bean counter, trying desperately to determine how many poppies must be removed to, say, make room for the statue of videogame heroes Banjo and Kazooie.

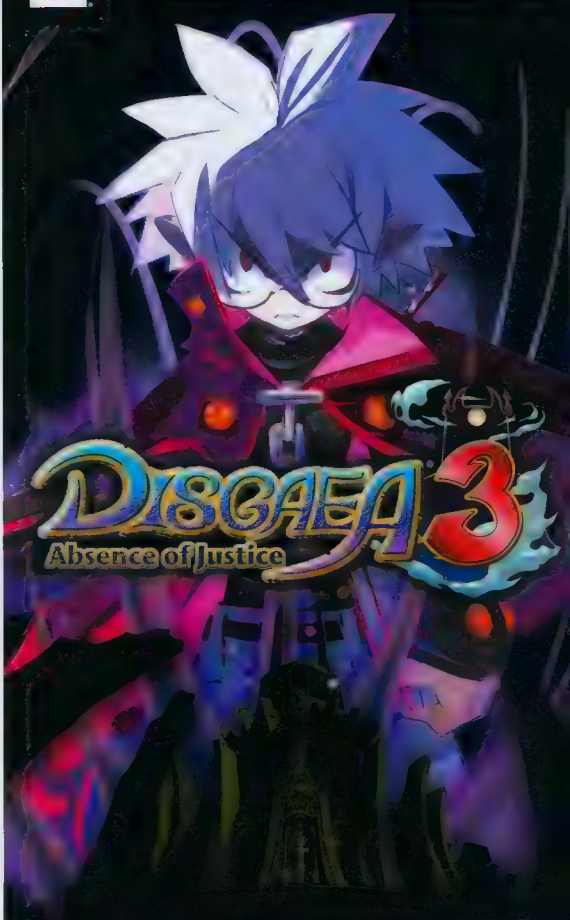
Additions to the sequel include two new environments from which piñatas may be captured with traps and brought back to the player's garden. Here, the game now allows access to arctic- and desert-inclined beasties, provided the player can stomach the idea that while he's away, chaos may ensue in paradise. The game also makes use of Xbox Live for multiplayer action and the Xbox Live Vision camera to scan special cards that can alter a garden.

And, yes, developer Rare has conceded it made the least friendly kids' game ever with the original Piñata. Now, with Paradise, the game allows for a murder-free experience with the separate, unequal, but certainly less punishing just-for-fun mode. Now, the insanity really is for everyone, even the little ones. **Greg Orlando**

parting shot

"Madame, I had a nice, clean place to stay. I left it to come here." — E.K. Hornbeck in Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee's Inherit the Wind.

PLAYSTATION 3



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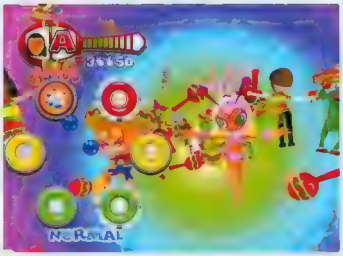
System: Wii | **Developer:** Gearbox | **Publisher:** Sega | **Multi:** Downloadable Content | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** September 23



Samba de Amigo

Mutinous good fun

Samba de Amigo is still as fun as it ever was on the Dreamcast. Graphically, the game has received a slight upgrade ... but that's not really what Samba was ever about. As a party game, it's still pretty irreplaceable. But in the eight years since this game was released, skill-based party software like Rock Band and Guitar Hero have expanded on the musical ideas of Samba, and provide players with both the fun of this game, while rewarding players with increased challenge. Still, Samba de Amigo is really one-of-a-kind. **Heather Campbell**

parting shot

Be sure to have four Wiimotes for two player action. Happily, those are the only peripherals you'll need.

Comparison shot: Gauge for yourself: Dreamcast on the right, Wii on the left.

System: Xbox 360, PS2, PS3, Wii | **Developer:** Midway | **Publisher:** Midway | **Multi:** 1-2 (Xbox 360, PS3) | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** Sept

TNA Impact!

Monsters of Sock...

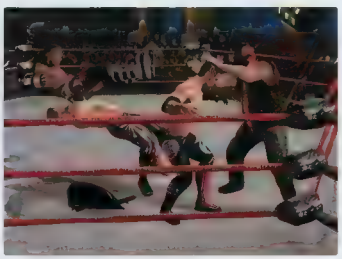
Total Nonstop Action wrestling offers a six-sided ring and interpersonal relationships fraught with intrigue, by which we mean grown men in spandex punching one another in the mouth.

As an organization, TNA serves as an intriguing alternative to the steroid circus that is Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment. With a roster made up of a blend of WWE castoffs and some young, talented grapplers, as well as an emphasis on wrestling over flash, TNA has carved a niche for itself.

With TNA Impact!, Midway steps into the ring to compete with THQ and the WWE's Smackdown vs. Raw game series, and the results are surprisingly pleasing. Impact! displays plenty of warts, but also stands as a fine first effort for Midway.

To its credit, Impact! gets the basics right. Wrestlers move smoothly and there's a fluidity to the in-ring action. The game is flexible enough to realize that when two combatants throw punches at one another, a chance exists that both will connect successfully. There's some graphic finery to be had here, too. Each of the wrestlers is well detailed, and the game as a whole eschews the sweaty-plastic-robot aesthetic that plagued other recent grappling games.

It's forgivable then, that Impact! pads its 20-plus-man roster with lots of no-name scrubs; TNA's roster is, understandably, much smaller than WWE's. What's harder to swallow is the grating, repetitive and often out-of-sync commentary, the dearth of match types, and the decided lack of wrestling game necessities like a button to allow a competitor to switch his focus from one enemy to another. It's also disheartening to note that in a game about a wrestling organization that makes in-ring action its focus, the individual wrestlers' movesets are limited, and that many of the characters only have one unique hold or throw—their "finisher."



Other design choices prove odd, awkward or both. Blood has been excised to make the game kinder and gentler, but combatants can use steel chairs as weapons, smashing one another over the head to great effect. Submission holds require pressing a random three-button combination to maintain or break. This is entirely too close to a quicktime event for comfort, not to mention it wholly emphasizes speed and accurate input (to say nothing of the memorization of the placement of the gameplay buttons) over a wrestler's skill at applying painful holds or even over his opponent's weakness and fatigue.

Truth in advertising demands it be said: The action here is neither total nor nonstop. Yet Impact! has laid the groundwork and, well, Rome certainly wasn't built in a day. **Greg Orlando**

parting shot

"Everyone wants to know what the Rock thinks about the homeless. Well, as long as they keep their cardboard boxes off The Rock's freshly manicured lawn, everything will be copacetic." - The Rock

System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** Arc System Works | **Publisher:** Arc System Works | **Multi:** Yes, Vs. | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** September 16

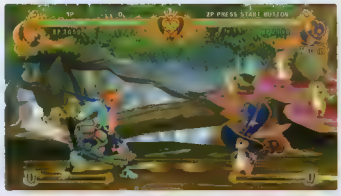
Battle Fantasia

Atreyu! Use your Chainsaw!

Has Capcom perfected the fighting-game input menu? Are there no other command options for a fighting game? Sitting down to play Battle Fantasia for the first time, without looking at the command list, I played all the way through to the final boss without losing a round. I chose Urs, the default heroic lead male (a young boy in armor with a steam-powered chain saw), and like most fighting game fans, I tried a fireball motion. Urs threw a fireball. I tried a dragon punch. Yep, that worked, too. A hurricane kick made Urs dash across the screen in a familiar arc, and then a double fireball motion unleashed Urs' supermove. Urs' back-heavy kick move throws the opponent across the screen, setting them up for a juggled...er, chain saw dragon punch. Yeah, I played Battle Fantasia when it was called Street Fighter III, parries included.

Still, a reskinned, fantasy Street Fighter game ain't a bad thing. The game has a charming medieval setting, and tips its hat toward classic role-playing games by including HP values for each player, as well as a string of damage numbers when attacks connect. This gives the game a more technical feel, since you can calculate which moves to engage by looking at the remaining HP for your opponent. The character list reads like a slightly dated cosplay catalog of the last five years, and includes everything that's been popular since 2001: a pirate, cat-girl, Gothic Lolita wand-waver and a gunslinger that shouts "TEXAS!!" during his attacks. If the online play is lagless, there's no reason a fighting game fan wouldn't enjoy this sharp, playful title. The Guilty Gear devs know what they're doing. **Heather Campbell**

"Still, a re-skinned, fantasy Street Fighter game ain't a bad thing."



parting shot

Fun, but slow. A bright and engaging VS game that you already know how to beat!

System: PS3 (PSN) | **Developer:** Sony Liverpool **Publisher:** SCEA | **Multi:** 1-8 **ESRB:** E | **Available:** TBA

WipEout HD

More WipEout, and that is good

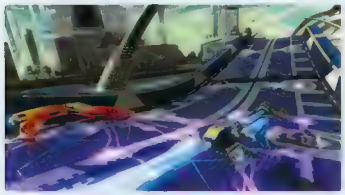
WipEout HD offers a review in the title itself: WipEout, in HD.

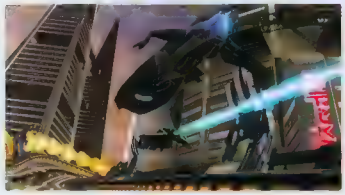
Anyone intimate with the WipEout series in need of more WipEout, more of what is great about the series without any dramatic retooling or overly creative extensions, will be routinely satisfied with this very good-looking version of a racing series that is perfectly happy sticking with what works. While the tracks are basically a collection of past games (with the biggest connection thematically to the PSP), this in no way diminishes the ultimate impact—running at a powerful 60 frames per second.

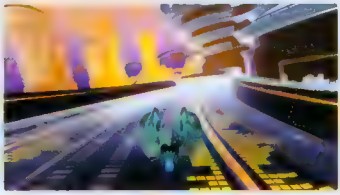
The formula still works exceedingly well: The satisfaction of nailing a lap without touching a single wall is about as good as it gets in a racing game, especially when such an accomplishment takes some genuine focus and skill that illuminates a fantastic balancing act between weapons strategies and sensational speed runs.

The control, the presentation, the assortment of tracks and modes—this game is filled with expertly handled design from top to bottom, and even if it is all getting familiar enough to start begging valid criticism, the PS3 hardware is enough to power new satisfactions. Initially I was impressed but sort of over the whole thing, but then you start to reveal little depths and details that make this game something more, a valid sequel that takes us back to when the brand was living in seminal territory. Anyone new to this series will be thrilled.

As price becomes more of a fluctuating presence on the downloadable space, it does paint the package in brighter colors to know you are dropping 20 bucks. And while the online function wasn't up to speed yet in this build I played, there is something about the idea of racing against humans in place of the artificial rigs that is of course a big deal for the series. **Brady Fiechter**







parting shot

The game looks as good as expected, and while it may feel like a retread out the gate, you can't deny how satisfying the HD'd-upped formula is on PS3. The Sixaxis control is ... not for me, but you might really dig it.

System: DS | **Developer:** KDEC **Publisher:** Konami | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** October 21

words Dave Halverson

I read a blurb recently, I'm not even sure where, that alleged the Castlevania series was running out of steam, and questioned whether or not the glyph system would be enough to keep it fresh. This was obviously not written by a Castlevania fan. Not only can Castlevania endure it; Castlevania fans crave it.

The reason Castlevania has held fast since the dawn of 8-bit is by sheer reiteration; variations on a theme that fans absolutely worship. What we can't endure is another room-to-room 3D fighting game. Ask any Castlevania fan what their favorite game in the series is and 99% of the time you'll get Symphony of the Night. Ask them what they dream about and they'll say a PS3/Xbox 360 game…just like Symphony of the Night. It was more likely that we'd get our next classic side-scroller on Wii, if at all, waggling our Wii whip like a bunch of horse jockeys, but we seem to have dodged that bullet, at least for now. Which begs the real question: Can the series endure Konami's reluctance to order up a next-generation side scrolling Castlevania in the interest of reclaiming the throne of greatest game of all time which Symphony held for a decade? In the meantime these DS games are the bloodline that keeps us from going mental while Konami gets Silent Hill out of their system. How dead is that horse? Didn't McDonalds cart the rest away to make riblets or something?

When it comes to 2D Castlevania, in IGA we trust. He knows exactly what we want. You can sense his presence in the code…the way he'll allude to a bygone pattern using a different creature or tune a boss to the point where he takes you exactly to the brink as if he knows when you'll be down to the last sliver of health... The price of things in the shops, the location of saves and warps—it's all tailor made explicitly for his legions of vampire killers, and then somehow Yamane composes a score as good as her last. All these games may look the same in form, but you can't judge a Castlevania by its cover. There's an intangible quality about each one that marches to its own skeletal drummer. Everyone has their favorites, but once in a blue moon we get that perfect storm, and another legend is born. I believe that Order of Ecclesia is that perfect storm of the DS brood, and among the top five games in the series taking its place among Symphony of the Night, Simon's Quest, Castlevania IV, Dracula X, and Bloodlines.

The direct descendant of Symphony of the Night, The Order of Ecclesia was one of many organizations formed after the disappearance of Richter Belmont as countermeasures to keep Dracula and his army at bay; all of which failed with the exception of Ecclesia. They alone (more specifically Barlowe, the order's regal head master) devised a glyph (Dominus) powerful enough to vanquish Dracula, which he then concluded could only be wielded by

"The reason Castlevania has held fast since the dawn of 8-bit is by sheer reiteration; variations on a theme that fans absolutely worship."

Shanoa, much to the chagrin of Ecclesia's other apt pupil Albus, who claims Barlowe promised the power to him. In a fit of rage Albus interrupts the sacred ritual as Shanoa's body is absorbing the powerful glyph, nearly killing her, steals the Dominus and disappears. Several weeks later as Shanoa completes her training, Barlowe endows her with two glyphs, and sends her to bring back Albus with force if necessary, although she can barely recall the event.

Every Castlevania has its hook: Harmony of Dissonance gave us spell books and more Metroid-style gameplay, Aria of Sorrow and Dawn of Sorrow introduced the Tactical Soul System, and Portrait of Ruin let us switch between characters, Jonathan and Charlotte. Ecclesia's is obviously the absorption of glyphs—a glorious sight as Shanoa lifts her flowing brown hair to reveal the marking on her back glistening with light as she absorbs the glyph. Although she's a strikingly beautiful young woman, Shanoa's evocative of Alucard minus the vapor trails, with a similar forward leaning run, flowing hair and graceful animation. Only IGA could bring such grace and beauty to a tiny one-dimensional image. On the whole Ecclesia has the best creatures since Symphony, if not better, and although I may regret this in the morning I'm going to say it has the better (making it the best) overall graphics. Ecclesia's visual presentation harkens back to Bloodline's adventurous special effects. It also marked Michiru Yamane's series debut, but IGA was still a glimmer in Simon Belmont's eye. Bloodlines was produced by Tomikaza Kirita and the core team that went on to create Contra: Hard Corps, Rocket Knight Adventures and Sega CD Snatcher. IGA makes similar broad strokes throughout Ecclesia conjuring enormous articulated monsters on a whim that fill the screen, and feats of visual trickery to simulate cascading seas.

Where things really get interesting, though, is in Ecclesia's overall design. It's as if IGA went into his lab and mixed 1 part Symphony of the Night, 1 part Simon's Quest, a half a beaker of Bloodlines, and then polished it off with a pinch of Shaman King: Master of Spirits. One thing it's not is Metroid. Most of the levels—which are arranged on a world map allowing you to come and go as you please once an area is completed—can be cleared on the first pass (with the exception of a chest or two or the odd secret room) once you get the Magnes—a physics-based propulsion glyph that forms a magnetic field around Shanoa creating a human slingshot, activated by strategically placed metal rods that IGA really likes to make us jump over bosses with. Where Metroid-style Castlevania's derive length from exploration, Ecclesia's more of a throwback to the pattern-based games of old, with the added RPG elements of Symphony, only built around the glyphs—the best offensive tactics IGA has come up with on DS. How well you manage the glyphs is ultimately the key to success. Aside from the ones you're awarded, at some point every key monster in Ecclesia, once vanquished, will leave behind the gleaming vapors that Shanoa has a few seconds to quickly absorb, in order to equip their weapon type. Glyphs for maneuvering are assigned to R, and weapon glyphs attach to X and Y where they can be mixed and matched to perform endless combos or special attacks that do mucho damage but drain MP. Shanoa can also purchase and equip armor in the game's villages, along with various other useful items contingent on whatever conditions might be attached. Be sure to feed any cats you've rescued, too. You must also respect Ecclesia's bosses. Prepare yourself for some epic battles. They are not happy, and always have a way of changing things up when they sense death is imminent. If you find yourself in a pinch, magic tickets are a bargain at a hundred bucks. It's better to warp out and experiment with glyph combinations at your leisure than to get pounded into oblivion.

The way I see it Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia is a sign. Not counting the ill-fated American made Castlevania Resurrection for Dreamcast that would have nailed the coffin shut, or the big 2-meg black-and-white relic Castlevania Legends on GameBoy, Shanoa is Castlevania's first female slayer, which is exactly the kind of tractor beam a side-scrolling Xbox 360/PS3 Castlevania needs to hit BIG. The success of Bionic Commando Rearmed has to have Konami thinking either partner game for the next 3D Castlevania (which has to be 360/PS3 given they've appeased the Wii gods and Nintendo's stance on "hardcore") or becoming the first publisher to produce a full-on next-gen side-scrolling epic the likes of which would return them to their former glory with enough left over to make a series of Elebit-based Silent Hill sequels. In any case, I'm pretty sure the series will endure Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia. I plan on enduring it a few times myself.

parting shot

Part Symphony of the Night and part Simon's Quest, Order of Ecclesia mixes vivid special effects, amazing articulated creatures, and epic bosses with a new glyph-based combat system that keeps on giving and a female slayer as cool as Alucard.

review

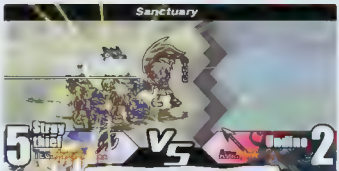
System: PSP | Developer: Sting | Publisher: Atlus | ESRB: Teen | Available: September 16

Yggdra Union

Don't pronounce it, just play it

Shipping on the Game Boy Advance long after most hardcore gamers had abandoned the platform, cult-hit Yggdra Union was an obvious candidate for a port to a modern handheld. But rather than just splitting the same assets across two DS screens, developer Sting chose to redraw the game completely for the PSP. At quadruple the resolution, players can fully appreciate the effort that went into each of the game's adorable character designs, beautifully illustrated cards and richly animated combat animations. A high-quality anime intro and fully voiced conversation scenes round out the package, erasing any evidence of the game's lower-spec origins.

But while the game has received a total visual overhaul, the play mechanics have received only minor tweaks that have done little to address the flaws of the original. Yggdra Union's developers made the bold choice of discarding every aspect of the traditional Final Fantasy Tactics strategy formula, instead creating an overhead battle system in which a card chosen from a pre-built deck determines your movement range and which special move you have access to, and in which characters must be placed in a + or x-shaped "union" before they can participate in the single attack you're allowed each turn. These mechanics feel intriguingly fresh at first, but don't give players much freedom to come up with creative solutions to the game's challenges. Instead, most of the strategy revolves around boring elements like meticulously planning out each character's movement path before the turn begins. The multi-army battles are exciting for a while, but their lengthy animated sequences—in which all you can really do is hold left or right to charge up special attacks—grow tiresome quickly. Fortunately, a charming cast, good localization, and distinctive visual style make it fun to explore Yggdra Union's new ideas, even if many of those ideas turn out to be bad ones. **Eric L. Patterson**



parting shot

Yggdra Union is too charming and creative to dislike, but its unconventional gameplay is too monotonous to love.

review

System: DS | Developer: Cavia / AQ Interactive / Procyon Studio | Publisher: XSEED | Multi: 1-8p local play | ESRB: E | Available: October

Korg DS-10

Assimilate the Korg

There's music to be made in this DS title, but be warned, Korg DS-10 is not a game. This is a powerful multi-track synthesizer, the first of its kind on DS. Based on classic professional Korg gear, the beloved MS-10 and MS-20 analog synths, Korg DS-10 is the collaborative pet project of music enthusiasts within AQ Interactive, Cavia (they handled the actual programming), Procyon Studio (led by Square Enix collaborator Yasunori Mitsuda), and of course Korg itself, providing the authentic sounds. XSEED Games takes care of the North American delivery.

Korg DS-10 really does sound great. These are the warm analog synths, drums and effects often favored by electronic artists like The Orb, Chemical Brothers and Aphex Twin (all have employed the MS-10 and MS-20 on past albums). The DS-10 produces an outstanding software facsimile, and it also makes superb use of touchscreen interface to capture the feel of using one of these awesome old school synthesizers in person—tapping notes into the keyboard, fiddling with effects knobs and patching sounds. Even for those with little-to-no synth gear experience, the DS-10 is very intuitive software.

The response to input is extremely fast, so new users can trial and error their way through the process rather effortlessly. This is exemplified by the Kaoss Pad and drum editor, where you can modify your loops by drawing and tapping various effects and envelopes on screen. It's versatile and immediate. Songs and sounds can be shared wirelessly, and DS-10 output can be synchronized on up to eight DS units (what a live show that would be!). All fans and performers of music should explore XSEED's Korg DS-10. **Mike Griffin**

parting shot

Korg DS-10 duplicates the layout and sounds of vintage analog synthesizers while providing users with intelligent and responsive touch screen control of song composition and effects. This is really polished software and possibly the ultimate travel game for electronic music fans.

System: PSP | **Developer:** tri-Ace, TOSE | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **Available:** October 21

preview

Star Ocean: First Departure

Forward march!

Star Ocean was never even localized for America's Super NES, but somehow it still managed to kick off a series that would become massively popular here. Anyone wondering why Star Ocean stood the test of time while, say, Brain Lord and Paladin's Quest did not, will find the answer in Star Ocean: First Departure, the first version of the original Star Ocean ever to be released in North American.

Visually, Star Ocean: First Departure is as radical as remakes get. What was once a 2D game with a completely contiguous world is now a series of prerendered 3D environments linked by a 3D overworld and filled with 3D battles. It's the same basic engine used in Star Ocean: Second Story, but a decade's worth of CGI advances have transformed First Departure into a far prettier game than its own sequel (which is also scheduled for a PSP release). Production I.G. provides the cherry atop Star Ocean's visual overhaul, with a series of beautiful cut scenes that introduce traditional animation to the series for the first time.

Look beneath the surface of First Departure, however, and you'll find a surprisingly faithful remake of the original Star Ocean. That surprise is not an entirely pleasant one, because Star Ocean had a sloppily written scenario that could have used a lot of rewriting, as well as a bumpy difficulty curve and some serious pacing issues. Those flaws remain in this version, but the elements that define the series still shine through—a simple, fun battle system, a brilliantly deep skill system, and an original premise that mixes sci-fi elements brazenly stolen from Star Trek with the usual fantasy-RPG clichés. Star Ocean could have used a little more tweaking, but tri-Ace's confidence in their first-ever game is by no means misplaced. Despite a few bumpy and dated elements, Star Ocean: First Departure is shaping up to be one of the premier RPGs on the PSP. **Casey Loe**

System: DS | **Developer:** Konami | **Publisher:** Konami | **Available:** December 2008

preview

Suikoden Tierkreis

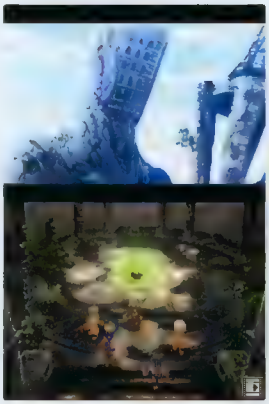
Can the magic return to the series?

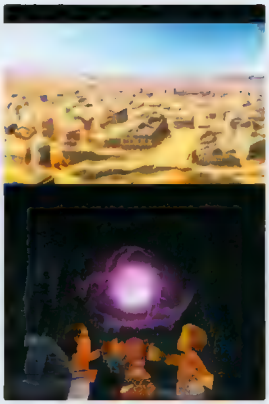
Hadn't you begun to get the sneaking feeling Suikoden wasn't coming back? Never before had so much time elapsed between installments, and no current platform seemed quite suited to the series' particular, quirky charms. Perhaps by default, the selection was Nintendo DS... but if history does indeed repeat itself, any Suikoden is guaranteed to be quality Suikoden.

Suikoden Tierkreis (German for "Zodiac," curiously enough) isn't numbered, and thus has the freedom to bend various series rules, even breaking one entirely—the main character will speak. If that wasn't a large enough franchise shakeup, you will begin the game with all 108 Stars of Destiny. In the beautiful anime FMV intro, 104 of them will be promptly massacred. Tierkreis is thus a sort of Suikoden in reverse, in which you will resurrect the souls of your once-great army, deciding whether to restore them to their former lives, or instead bring them back as equipment, weapons, or even monsters (!).

In another departure from series norms, Tierkreis appears to have no story, setting, or character connection to any previous game whatsoever. For Suikojunkies awaiting the long-teased conclusion to events in Harmonia this may come as a disappointment, but just as many fans may argue that the Byzantine history Suikoden has developed with its (very literal) cast of thousands was ripe for a reboot. In any case, we salute the return of the series. **Nick Des Barres**

"Tierkreis is thus a sort of Suikoden in reverse..."





www.playmagazine.com

preview

System: PSP | **Developer:** SNK Playmore | **Publisher:** SNK Playmore | **Multi:** 1-2 players | **Available:** Q4 2008

The King of Fighters Collection
-The Orochi Saga-

I'm quite happy to see the love that SNK Playmore is starting to show for the PSP, and what better way to get me excited for a little NeoGeo goodness on the go than to bring out a collection centered around one of my favorite fighting game franchises. The King of Fighters Collection -The Orochi Saga-, no matter what the name may imply, isn't just the three series releases that would be considered the "orochi" chapters. Instead, you'll get five years of product, from the very beginning of the King of Fighters saga (KoF '94) up through one of its best iterations ever (KoF '98). **Eric L. Patterson**

preview

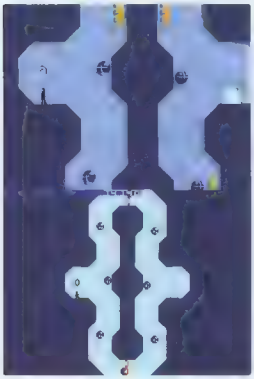
System: DS, PSP | **Developer:** Silver Birch | **Publisher:** Atari | **Multi:** 1-2 players | **Available:** August 26

N+

Puzzle (a loose term here) games don't need a sparkling presentation and jointed structure to work a little magic, and indeed N+ is good proof. Look at those shots: got your attention? Then this is the game that might work for you, a collection of stark obstacle courses that demand incredible precision in control and execution of running, jumping and sliding while grabbing gold blocks and navigating toward the exit. Obstacles get increasingly in the way, demanding a stringent understanding of how your little Ninja will call on momentum and inertia to get around all the little angles and drops that define the gameplay space. This is platforming in its purest form, with a huge amount of varying levels to place demand on your skills. An addictive little game that makes sense for a portable. **Brady Fiechter**

parting shot

Approach this game fully aware of its unforgiving pedigree: come for demanding platform puzzles and accept the bland presentation and structure.



preview

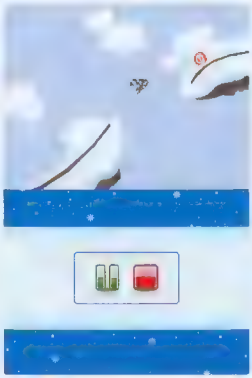
System: DS | **Developer:** nXile enterta nment | **Publisher:** Genius Products | **Multi:** 1 player | **Available:** September 16, 2008

Line Rider 2: Unbound

Playing Line Rider 2: Unbound, I'm a kid again. Sitting on the desk in front of me is a blank piece of paper, a world with endless possibilities whose only limit is what I can imagine upon it. I draw a line, and that line becomes a path, and before my eyes the paper comes to life, as a little boy races down that line on his sled. So I draw a second line, and a third, my lines becoming hills, and trees, and loops, and all sorts of other things for the boy to explore. Just as I once looked upon the empty sheet of paper and wondered what lay before me, now the boy looks upon the world I've crafted for him, wondering what awaits him. All I can do, as I watch him race into the unknown, is smile. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

A simple yet deeply complex "toy" that requires a lot of creativity and a little too much cash.



System: PSP **Developer:** Marvelous Ent. inc. K2 **Publisher:** Marvelous Ent. USA / XSEED Games **Online/Multi:** 1-2 Players **ESRB:** NYR **Available:** Sept 23 review

Valhalla Knights 2

A knight in not-so-shining armor

Does disappointment come from the failure of someone or something to perform at an expected level, or from our choice to create those expectations in the first place?

That's a question I find myself asking over Valhalla Knights 2, because the game disappointed me. Yes, the original was an extremely challenging dungeon crawler aimed squarely at serious gamers who enjoy that kind of niche, but at the same time I saw in it hope for the Japanese RPG genre overall thanks to some of the elements it put forth. With this sequel, I see a game that has regressed just as much as it has progressed. Too many little things still feel like the far too frequent Japanese game-development mentality of "frustration = difficulty," and small annoyances–such as no indication of how much of a quest you've completed or the halving of your gold when you die in a game where you die a lot–combine with forehead-slapping decisions like removing the previous game's rule of pausing combat while you navigate battle menus.

Thankfully, somebody along the way seemed to agree that Valhalla Knights 2 was just too unfriendly, so the version we're getting here in North America has received a variety of tweaks to help make for a better gaming experience. And, to be fair, there are indeed a number of improvements, such as far more appealing dungeons, an expanded character creator (never mind its strange fetish for blondes), and a more extensive job system. **Eric L. Patterson**

"With this sequel, I see a game that has regressed just as much as it has progressed."

parting shot

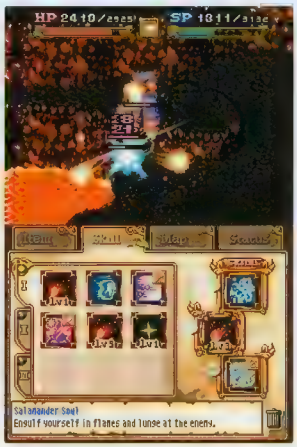
Valhalla Knights 2 is a game "hardcore" dungeon crawler fans will still enjoy, and most others will still find way too unfriendly and difficult. I find myself sad that the game didn't strive to reach loftier goals in its sophomore attempt.

System: DS **Developer:** Sonic Powered **Publisher:** Aksys Games **Online/Multi:** ...mited WiFi Co-Op, Two Cartridges **ESRB:** E **Available:** August 28, 2008 review

From The Abyss

Regrettably, not a James Cameron game

From the Abyss is not the kind of game you'll have fond memories of. It's a time-waster; a middle of the road title. The kind of game you might play in-between tent-pole releases. As a randomized action-RPG dungeon crawler, it doesn't represent the sort of hard-core challenge that games like Shiren dish out, nor is it a playful hack-and-slash like Secret of Mana. Instead, it's an unbroken fantasy, with simple, meat-and-potatoes delivery. As our expectations of games grow, titles like this are going to have to start bringing more to the table to be playable. A standard fantasy story (with a customizable protagonist) isn't enough to keep the game going, especially when RPGs on the DS are as common as ripped shirts on the covers of paperbacks in the Fantasy section at Barnes and Noble. What you can guess about From the Abyss is about as much as you're going to get. Inventory system on the bottom screen, with touch-screen interaction for spells. Assignable skill slots, an unforgiving experience system that punishes the hell out of you when you die. Unblemished anime art that we would have killed for in the early 90's ... and now is on the back of every backpack at Target. Still, nothing about the game is *bad*. It's just ... nothing about it is very good, either. **Heather Campbell**



parting shot

Nothing special to see here, but does being average mean that a game is bad? No. Maybe. Probably not.

Tears to Tiara

Prologue to the Unwritten Tears to Tiara

Daisy Lee

System: PlayStation 3 **Developer:** Aquaplus **Publisher:** Aquaplus **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced US

"If you skip all the talking and titillating and head straight to the battlefield, you'll find a respectable SRPG in the mold of Shining Force."

While games like Ninja Gaiden 2 and Resident Evil 4 suggest the Japanese game industry is slowly coming around to the tastes of Western markets, the success of games like Tears to Tiara show just how far apart we remain. Heavy on dialogue, light on action, and modest in budget, it's hard to imagine Aquaplus's Tears to Tiara drawing anything more than derision in the US. But in its native land, it has sold a respectable 60,000 copies and has the same average user-review score as Metal Gear Solid 4 on Japan's version of Amazon.

Tears to Tiara was born in a niche of gaming that doesn't even exist in the US: the story-driven porn game. In the adults-only PC version of Tears, the hero beds most of his female party members, including ones who seem to be barely out of puberty. Americans tend to be dismissive of such things, but porn games are taken seriously in Japan, and many evolve into successful entertainment franchises that involve no adult content at all. (The all-ages To Heart and Utawarerumono anime series, both of which are available in English, are also based on porn games created by Aquaplus.) The porn game business is fiercely competitive, and has attracted many of the industry's best writers and artists. Since the games are typically made for low-spec PCs that can't handle much in the way of action, a good story and attractive characters are of utmost importance, and the best games in the genre can easily compete on those fronts with anything coming out from mass-market console publishers.

But times are tough in the piracy-ravaged world of porn games, and publishers are becoming increasingly eager to break into consoles. Most are content to release censored, slightly upgraded versions of their games to the PS2, but a few are gambling big on heavily remade versions for the PS3 and 360. The makers of Tears to Tiara didn't merely redraw every single asset from the original PC game and commission an original HD animated intro: they also tore out the game's pixel-art SRPG battles and replaced them with a 3D engine that allows for flashy 3D characters and battlefields in a style similar to the recent GameCube Fire Emblem games. It's a huge step for a publisher that has never before made a 3D game, and they've clearly stumbled in areas like character animation, which is laughably bad at times. But the PS3 version of Tears to Tiara is a complete reinvention for a game originally designed to run on Windows PCs with no graphics cards.

Despite its flashy SRPG battle engine, Tears to Tiara remains a visual novel at its core, and not even a very good one. Between the introductory tutorial battle and the game's first real battle, you will sit through no less than two hours of fully-voiced dialogue, spoken by cardboard cutouts on either side of the screen. You have no decisions to make (besides whether to fast forward each individual line with a tap of the X button), as villains are introduced and slain, characters are kidnapped and rescued, and mostly—everyone just talks. A lot. Tears to Tiara would actually have a pretty cool story if you simply read the summary; its central twist is that the Lord of Darkness, upon being awakened from his 1,000 year slumber by one of the game's villains, decides to join the hero's party and become the game's main character instead. (A wise choice, since he will go onto "marry" every uterus-equipped member of your army.) It's a cute idea, but the dialogue is so ridiculously overwritten, with lofty speeches delivered to the heavens and scores of go-nowhere subplots, that it's absolutely unbearable to follow. Despite its admirable attempt to upend a few RPG clichés, Tears to Tiara is a moe-game through and through. Its goal is not to tell a riveting tale, but to hook gentleman players with the too-perfect women in the cast, who fit the usual servile-maid and buxom-tomboy types. The sex is gone, but Tears to Tiara still attempts to stoke the loins of its players by mixing in pieces of original art that depict the girls in a sexually suggestive poses.

If you skip all the talking and titillating and head straight to the battlefield (which the game does allow you to do), you'll find a respectable but uninspired SRPG in the mold of Shining Force. It has a few interesting ideas, like allowing characters to charge up Chain Attacks that the player can trigger during combat animations to sneak in a second hit, but the combat maps are usually simplistic, with flat terrain and enemy rosters that are often just 10 copies of the same enemy. Fortunately, the music's nice, the game ramps up to a decent challenge, and there are a few pretty areas along the way. All in all, the strategy is as good as any of the recent shovelware SRPGs that Atlus has been bringing out on the Xbox 360, and Tears to Tiara is certainly a whole lot prettier.

Aquaplus may have succeeded in making a low-spec porn game relevant to software-hungry Japanese PS3 owners, but they have a long way to go if they hope to make titles relevant to the international marketplace. It's hard to imagine even Atlus or NIS paying a fortune to localize a game with a massive script and 50 hours of voice, only to get reamed by American game reviewers who found even the state-of-the-art, super-high-budget event scenes of Metal Gear Solid 4 to be a challenge to sit through. But at least Tears to Tiara is an easy import for anyone who's desperate for a conventional PS3 SPRG, or simply eager to live out tame anime-harem fantasies in 720p.

parting shot

I cannot imagine why anyone would enjoy having a trite, J-video game story read to them over the span of dozens of hours while they sit and stare at an unchanging TV screen, tapping the X button at 20 second intervals. But clearly some people do, and more power to 'em. As for the SRPG buried amidst the talking, it's certainly no Valkyria Chronicles or even a Disgaea 3, but I've played much worse.

System: PlayStation 3 Developer: Rhino Studios Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment
Available: [illegible]

Not killing has never been so beautiful

Nick Des Barres

Sony partnered with National Geographic for AFRIKA, represented as a secondary database mode featuring extensive real-life archive footage of the game's wildlife.

A thought occurred to me after several days of wandering the windswept savannah, as dawn broke pearlescent pink across distant hills, brush and boulders casting horizontal shadows fifty feet long: The last several dozen games I had played and enjoyed had, at their core, the concept of competition. Whether that competition pitted players against enemies, fellow humans, or the clock, there was always a winner and a loser. In Rhino Studios' lyrical AFRIKA, nobody dies, nothing is blown up, and there is no way to "fail."

Some will argue that this is no different than the many types of "casual," "non-games" Nintendo is so aggressively promoting, but there is one key difference—visuals. AFRIKA is dressed up as pretty as almost any other PS3 or Xbox 360 game, and thus served to reinforce something I believe very strongly: Graphics are equally as important as gameplay. In AFRIKA, quite literally, the visuals are the game.

In this game, you take photos of wildlife. That's the entire experience. Despite amusing internet rumors to the contrary, no zombies ever show up and no alien base is discovered beneath the rolling plains of the Dark Continent. Instead, you begin the game as a rookie male photographer or female zoologist on safari, armed with nothing more than a crappy, three generation old digital camera. In-game money with which to buy a huge selection of new cameras, lenses, camping tools, and other kooky gadgets like remotely operated vehicles can be earned by accepting photography assignments via e-mail from wildlife publications and TV shows around the world. By game's end (although there is no true ending—AFRIKA can be played forever), you will have acquired a massive compliment of cameras, all immaculate simulations of real-life Sony prosumer models. Akin to something like a camera fetishist's Gran Turismo, each camera is recreated down to the last detail: Although there are auto modes, you have complete control over F-stops, shutter speed, aperture width, and focal length. The recreations are so accurate that even blurry shots due to shaky hands are simulated, and the SIXAXIS can be rotated to switch from panorama to portrait. You will need all these tools to satisfy your clients' demands, which begin simple but rapidly ramp up to the highly complex ("Get a shot of a giraffe grazing from tree level" soon becomes "Take a shot of a superb starling perched atop a water buffalo's head" and "I need an image of a dung beetle rolling their ball silhouetted against the setting sun").

The game world is divided into five geographically diverse areas, from sun-baked plateaus to marshy swamps. Each zone has an actual, living ecology—massive herds of water buffalo graze at the edges of swamps as herds of elephants cluster protectively around their young deeper in the water. Ostriches sun themselves, occasionally performing mating dances as meerkats dart in and out of holes in the ground. Placid scenes of impala foraging on the savannah will occasionally be interrupted by a cheetah darting in for a kill, sending the herd running panicked in all directions as vultures circle overhead, awaiting a free meal. These sights are simply astonishing, animated and textured at a world-class level. To see a gazelle flicking its ears to drive away flies rendered with the same care as Solid Snake reloading his rifle was profound.

AFRIKA is certainly not for everyone, but for the nature enthusiast or those simply looking for a soothing break from all the carnage, the mere act of roaming the savannah and wondering at the sights presented to you is deeply rewarding. It's disappointing Sony USA has shown little interest in AFRIKA; perhaps another publisher willing to take a chance on the noncompetitive will do the world a favor and license it.

parting shot

The audience for AFRIKA is certainly limited, but people who dig it will really dig it. If you have an appreciation for the languorous and offbeat, AFRIKA is your game.

> "Some will argue that AFRIKA is no different than the many types of "casual," "non-games" Nintendo is so aggressively promoting, but there is one key difference—visuals."

System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Square/Think Garage | **Publisher:** Square Enix
Available: Now Japan, Unannounced US

Sigma Harmonics

words Nick Des Barres

Didn't you just love that schizoid era Square went through in the late 90s? Before the epic failure of Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within and ex-Enix CEO Yoichi Wada's conversion of the company into a remake factory, Square produced much, much more than just Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy. Their PSone period was silly with experimental new IP; genres ranged far and wide, encompassing shooters, fighters, racing, and even wrestling games. These were salad days for Square fans—it was during what was arguably the company's strongest era that cult hits like Einhänder, Tobal and Vagrant Story were born. Call me crazy, but I'm convinced the explosive creativity we know the company is capable of is coming back... on Nintendo DS. As living proof I submit The World Ends With You, Nanashi no Game ("Nameless Game", Japan-only), and this, the hugely innovative "Mystery RPG" Sigma Harmonics.

There's never been anything quite like Sigma Harmonics, making it difficult to describe. Although much more than just a sum of its parts, try to imagine a hallucinatory fusion of Phoenix Wright, PSone-era Final Fantasies, the board game Clue, a rhythm game, and purple...lots of purple. Sigma Harmonics is so bizarre that it almost feels like a rebellion instigated by mid-level Square Production Team 1 staffers made to slave away for years painting grass and cobblestone textures for FF games (indeed, the core team behind Sigma

> "Try to imagine a hallucinatory fusion of Phoenix Wright, PSone-era Final Fantasies, the board game Clue, a rhythm game, and purple... lots of purple."

was responsible for the mostly awful FFVII: Dirge of Cerberus—but don't let that scare you off).

In the dreamlike post-WWII Japan-by-way-of-19th-century-Vienna posited by Sigma Harmonics, the Kurogami family of ototsukai ("sonimancer", for lack of a better translation—the Kurogami control sound) and Tsukiyumi family of mediums have for countless generations protected the world from time-traveling demons who seek to nefariously alter the past for their own gain. After an uneventful day at high school, the scions of both clans—calm, cool, bespectacled hero Sigma Kurogami, and bubbly heroine Neon Tsukiyumi—emerge to discover a post-apocalyptic world in utter ruin. Returning to the sprawling Kurogami mansion, they find it empty save for the family's faithful butler... who recognizes neither of them. The duo quickly surmises that powerful time-manipulating demons have slaughtered one or more of Sigma's ancestors, preventing his birth and leaving no Kurogami heir to continue the fight. The only solution will be to use their collective powers to visit shadows of past in which the demons have wrought their havoc, but Sigma and Neon can only witness past events—look, but don't touch. Not being able to influence the shadows directly, they have to use information gathered by "replaying" events to solve the demons' crimes.

Each chapter unfolds as a classic whodunit in the Doylian vein, as the demons coerce various Kurogami members to off each other in increasingly horrific ways. The Clue connection surfaces in the game's setting: Virtually the entire adventure takes place in the labyrinthine Kurogami mansion as various permutations of the same crime play out with the same cast of characters. Sigma and Neon must traverse the halls of the mansion, watching events related to the chapter's central murder and collecting evidence. These sequences are presented as lovely polygon-character-on-prerendered-maps that strongly recall PSone FFs, coming complete with random encounters. During battle you take control of Neon, who channels spirits that manifest as FFX-2-like costumes Commands are input with cards, more of which become unlocked as the game progresses. The truly fascinating aspect of the battle system is how it links with Masashi Hamauzu's beautiful music; equalizer gauges placed beside each of the three card sets charge based on the tune's beat. Just as Neon can switch costumes mid-fight to acquire different abilities, battle music can be changed on the fly to alter the rates at which various cards charge. If this all sounds positively nuts, well...that's probably because it is. I cannot stress enough how original Sigma Harmonics' combination of disparate elements are.

However artfully arranged, every aspect of the game is culled from another, save one: The incredible Chosuiri ("Superdeduction") System. This is the core of the Sigma Harmonics' challenge, and the finest aspect of a game already swimming in them. At any time during your investigation of a certain chapter, you can elect to arrange collected evidence on a board signifying Sigma's thoughts. Blockage in his deduction of the case

Sigma Harmonics' brilliant "Superdeduction System" actually gives the player the tools to solve in-game mysteries for himself.

is represented as dark spots on the board; prompted by his musings, you place evidence pieces around the mental blockages to dispel them. With dozens of pieces influencing all board spaces that connect with them, and thousands of possibilities per chapter, the system should do much to satisfy those who get petulant with games like Phoenix Wright that essentially crack cases for you. Although arriving at the perfect solution to any given case may take literally hours of pondering, Sigma Harmonics allows for any interpretation of events. No matter how broken your logic may be, Sigma will provide a plausible explanation, and the game continues. The further you are from the truth, however, the harder the chapter boss will be, and the lower your chapter rating.

Sigma Harmonics is something of a revelation. I loves me some FF, but it is games like this and The World Ends With You that really serve to prove how frighteningly talented Square's Production Team 1 is. I believe this is Square Enix's best game yet on DS, and certainly one of the finest third party titles the platform is ever likely to see. Although heavy barriers to localization are present—extreme Japan-centrism and entirely vertical text boxes among them—to not allow Western gamers the chance to experience Sigma and Neon's adventures in superdeduction would be a crime.

parting shot

Square Enix's finest game yet on DS, Sigma Harmonics somehow fuses the adventure game, the RPG, and the rhythm game with classic Doylian mystery for a wholly unique experience.

System: NDS | **Developer:** Nintendo R&D1 | **Publisher:** Nintendo | **Available:** Now Japan, Date TBA U.S

Rhythm Tengoku Gold

"Kaaaamo~ne hai!"

words Eric L. Patterson

Rhythm Tengoku Gold is kind of like the type of person one could imagine as a "realistic" mate in life: cute, funny, overflowing with personality and charm, yet possessing a quirk or two that bugs the hell out of you sometimes.

The "quirk" here is the new control scheme, one which tosses out the security and precision of tried-and-true button presses for touchscreen taps, holds, and flicks. When one of Gold's musical mini-games asks you to get to tapping, things aren't so bad, but when keeping time with the rhythm requires a swipe of the stylus, things can get frustrating. After the original Rhythm Tengoku's brilliance in letting you just melt away into the flow of the music, having to keep part of your concentration on making sure you simply get the movements done properly is disappointing.

Though I found Rhythm Tengoku Gold's control to not be as accurate as I'd like, it's something you can (and should) learn to live with, because otherwise this is an utterly enjoyable experience. The new challenges and music grew on me faster than I was expecting, to the point where I constantly find myself humming many of the game's audio tracks. Though we'll be getting a North American version (retitled Rhythm Heaven), I'm not expecting all of the game's best elements—such as the catchy J-pop-esque songs—to remain intact; this may be one of those cases where buying two copies of the same game is in order.

parting shot

While it doesn't quite match the near perfection of the original, Rhythm Tengoku Gold is a fantastic rhythm game that will put a smile on your face and get many a song stuck in your head.

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Huxley

Keep 'em separated

Child art of the moon

Dr. Merwyn Huxley tried to bring them together, but it wasn't meant to be. After the unstoppable Nuclearites ravaged the moon and caused catastrophic damage to Earth—sea levels rose, volcanoes erupted and whole continents reformed, the last survivors were completely isolated from each other. In the midst of this isolation, and as survivors contended with massive radioactive fallout, some of the people began to adapt to their new environment. As these DNA mutations settled, three distinct human-origin species emerged: the Sapiens, pure humans of old; the mutated Alternative; and the disfigured and bestial Hybrids.

The surviving factions eventually made contact and tried to live together for several decades, but the increasingly xenophobic Sapiens began to oppress and mistreat the mutants. It was Dr. Huxley who made it his life's work to mend the wounds separating this new spectrum of humanity. It was he who tried to combine Sapien and Alternative DNA, spawning a new order of smarter, more violent Hybrids. After Huxley's disappearance, it wasn't long before the subjugated mutants revolted. And as humans of any genetic strain are wont to do, all-out warfare ensued.

The new empires

Huxley's Sapiens and Alternatives expanded their civilizations at a rapid pace with the assistance of Webzen's superb artists and world-builders. Paramount to this construction process was the visualization of two vast capital cities, the Sapiens' Nostalonia and the Alternative's Eska. The Webzen art team has a strong industrial background, an ideal basis for Huxley's future Earth scenario. Rigid industrial lines are tempered by classic European architectural flourishes that were inspired by photo-reference trips to Prague, Rome and Vienna. The artists also carefully studied the urban planning of these historic cities, noting functional elements like how streets and districts are connected.

For Nostalonia, erected atop the ruins of a human city, the general theme was similar to the rebuilding of Rome: the return of a great human civilization. The sea level has risen dramatically and Sapien builders have had to construct massive dams around the city. They also rebuilt many of the old relics, reclaiming the world for their elders. The city has evolved to be a thick, heavily fortified facility for the intolerant Sapiens, who surround themselves with protective yet conventional high technology

Eska is located in an extraordinary valley, where the Alternatives found mutant trees with the capacity to decontaminate radioactive residue. Designed with a distinct baroque flavor, Eska is an all-new city, built using new materials and refined metals (also seen in the Alternative's unique medieval-inspired armor). Unlike the Sapiens' old-school tram rail system in Nostalonia, the Eska metro uses hover technology. Both trains provide convenient player transportation to explore Huxley's epic capital cities while gearing up for massive online combat.

Our intrepid mid-level co-op crew dashes through the halls of a seemingly abandoned industrial plant. Note the entirely workable onscreen HUD tracking your abilities, position, quest status and the vitals of you and your party.

Enter Producer Kang...

"My favorite directors are Tarantino and Rodriguez, but if you were to look at Huxley as a film, it would probably be more like a sci-fi blockbuster than *Grindhouse*," ponders Ki-Jong Kang, the producer and creative director of Huxley, as we stumble onto the topic of Planet Terror.

KJ and I talk over smokes and joe at an uptown café in Seoul, Korea. I've just returned from deep inside the

"We plan to launch the patch for 100 vs. 100 battles simultaneously with the U.S. launch of the game."

Ki-Jong Kang, producer

Producer Kang sits at a humble desk among his peers instead of in a secluded office inside the Huxley studio.

The Huxley world map as featured in the current Korean game. As you can see, the Sapien (Nostalonia) and Alternative (Eska) truly are a world apart.

Webzen testers' area, where I created another character in Huxley: a female Sapien Avenger this time, tweaked to be tall, short-haired and with a grim, resolute expression. The game's newbie tutorial missions and lower-level quests are forgiving and enlightening. You'll learn the basics of combat (which could be prefaced by: "Have you played Unreal or Quake? Okay, you're ready"), how to read and select mission-related tasks, and finally the fun stuff like vehicle training. I tell Kang I paused questing just before our rendezvous so I could play a quick PVP Radar Domination map. It was eight-on-eight good fun, but I was hoping for more testers and a big, epic battle.

Kang nods, "The eight-versus-eight PVP gameplay has a nice, specific flavor. The maps put the players pretty close together, and not too many vehicles. It's good for the Radar Domination mode, but yes—16 versus 16 and 20 versus 20 is even better."

How about this fabled 100-versus-100 gameplay in Huxley, is that still good to go? "Oh yes. The most we've done live so far is 30 versus 30, and it was very smooth. We've thoroughly tested the same type of server clusters for 100 versus 100, and I think we're fine. We plan to launch the patch for 100-versus-100 battles simultaneously with the U.S. launch of the game."

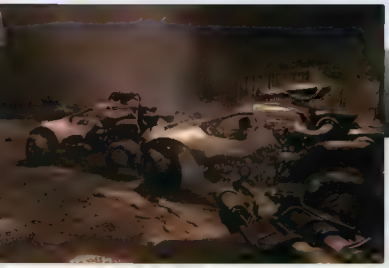
You heard it here first, folks. When Webzen's partner NHN USA rolls out the North American Huxley game this holiday season, we'll have 200-soldier battlefields. I mention my slight concerns to Kang about NHN's inexperience with a MMOFPS of Huxley's scale. Are they going to have the server capacity and know-how? "We'll test and prepare the server configurations for them so all they have to do is put them in place. Three kinds of servers, actually—main MMO server, peer-to-peer server for free quests and up to eight-versus-eight PVP, and dedicated servers for the 20 versus 20 and 100 versus 100. It's going to cost us a lot!" he laughs, with a hint of unease.

Worth playing, worth paying?

That's what it's going to take to make Huxley succeed, as big bandwidth is essential. This isn't just a home for quick frag sessions. Players won't simply launch a multiplayer mode and click a random server. Huxley is a skill-based shooter like Unreal and a persistent online RPG like World of Warcraft, with servers of up to 5,000 players spread across dozens of in-game locations. Everyone experiences the same in-game timeline and conditions, and everyone is able to monitor which faction, Sapien or Alternative, is currently rocking the battlefields and pulling in more rare resources—affecting global control and economy. Then it occurs to me: 100 versus 100 for the U.S. launch? Aren't Korean gamers looking forward to it? Using a fantasy MMORPG analogy, don't Korean players love large-scale guild warfare?

"Korean players just aren't as eager to play in the huge FPS battles the way Western players are. They aren't even used to the gameplay of titles like Unreal and Quake, the sort of gameplay that Huxley has. Not many have even tried those FPS games. So battles of that scale are considered new for Korean users, and few will actually play them," KJ laments.

He's probably right. The top ranking and/or most played games in Korea are "light user" first-person shooter titles—games like Sudden Attack and Special Forces, incredibly low-spec Counter-Strike-style shooters with small squads and tiny levels. I tell Kang that this is sort of baffling. Those games have their charms, but they're not especially well built or easy on the eyes, and the collision and hit models are totally outdated. Why do people spend so much time playing such average shooters? "Basically the packaged PC games market doesn't exist here, especially for shooters, so very few players have had a chance to experience high-quality



premium FPS releases."

So a game like Call of Duty 4 that sold multimillion copies in the U.S., made every award shortlist? "It probably sold something like 5,000 copies here. I really like CoD4. Very good multiplayer. But in Korea it's like, 'What's Call of Duty 4?' They don't know. They don't even bother to look for PC games in the shops. It's over 99 percent download only and free-to-play. Micro-payments take care of everything."

I wonder if it's a cultural issue or just a matter of us catching up. North America seems quite content to support both the lump-sum monthly subscription model and micro-transactions, while the Asian MMO market has almost entirely converted to virtual item revenue. How much are users actually spending on these free-to-play games?

"You know Webzen's other game, the fantasy MMO called SUN? It's a free-to-play and micro-payment title. It doesn't have a huge number of active users in Korea, but some users are spending an average of 50 dollars a month. Buying weapons, armor, special passes to high-reward dungeons…"

That's more profitable for the publisher than a $15 sub, and they haven't had to dirty their hands with retail box marketing or distribution. I proffer to Kang that perhaps it comes down to machine spec: North American PC gamers have a higher average system spec than Korean users. It's safe to say that more Westerners will be playing Huxley at maximum detail settings, soaking up those high-end Unreal Engine 3 shaders. Logic may suggest that Westerners buy more made-for-retail PC games, including FPS and MMO titles, because they actually have hardware that can run new games, while the free-to-play downloadable titles favored by Korean gamers are almost universally low-spec, not exactly spurring the upgrade market. It must be comforting for Webzen to see games like Age of Conan do so well in the West, ramping up the average PC spec even higher.

"It's a good phenomenon," Kang considers. "But we're seriously improving the rendering quality between the Korean and American launches. Our target entry spec is 7-series GeForce cards, and we're also preparing some advanced features for the 9-series cards—such as converting our shadow maps into beautiful, full dynamic lighting like in Crysis."

We Westerners certainly approve of massive battles, driveable vehicles and a boffo graphical payoff in our multiplayer FPS games. Huxley is looking *very* good, sporting the same brand of detailed textures, long view distances, big particle effects and densely armored normal-mapped characters that players love in other Unreal Engine 3 shooters like Gears and UT 3. And according to the spec of our test machine, Huxley ran smooth with full Shader Model 3.0 effects enabled on a

The Hybrid Hunting Party

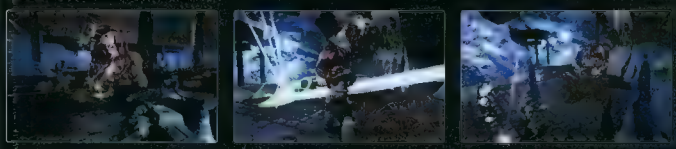
You'll spend most of your time in Huxley battling Hybrid enemies in Huxley's cooperative PVE quests, as we tag along with teams of mid-level (level 27 of 50) Sapien characters.

The rugged frontline Enforcer is wearing a heavy C-class armor set and wields a Repeater Shotgun that delivers a very effective close-range spread blast. His helmet has been slotted with an effect that detects danger from behind. It's great against the stealthy backstabbers of Huxley, like his Phantom friend on the left. She's wearing cloaking-friendly light C-class armor and carries a deadly compressed Sniper Rifle. Her gloves are slotted with a great firing stability item, steadying her snipes and reducing recoil. The Avenger on rear flank has donned versatile medium C-class armor and carries the RPG, an effective weapon at almost any range in his hands.

This Enforcer (center) has selected the Discharger, a devastating close-range flamethrower. He also has a deep supply of run boost, courtesy of his Sprint upgrade. The Phantom dashing into the room behind him has equipped the Regulator, a Phantom-specific laser weapon, with twin effects: You may sap enemy shields or recharge a friend's shields, like those of her Enforcer teammate barrelling into trouble. If she was on point, she might "test" a room first by using a slotted Hologram item that projects a perfect 3-D copy of the user, tempting potential killers to reveal their positions. The Avenger leaping down the stairs with a fireball scorching his ass sports a classic Rocket Launcher, always a crowd-clearing favorite.

Say hello to Othello

The party reaches one of the mission's first big, lumbering roadblocks: Othello. As expected, this detailed Hybrid giant has truckloads of hit points. The real surprise comes when Othello charges up his twin concussive rocket launchers. The crew quickly spreads out to strategic firing positions, confusing the high-powered behemoth. Such discretion pays off, as both Kill Points and remaining health are converted into Experience at the end of PVE and PVP battles, thanks to the Squad Benefit system.

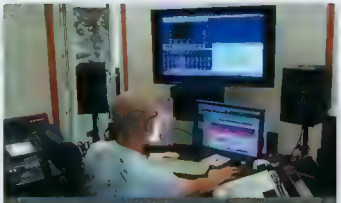


Say hello to Panthino

When a 14-foot mutant with an enormous spiked sphere for a fist pins you in a corner, you'll scarcely have time to whisper "Panthino" before stars, white light and a respawn point greet you. Panthino's Hammer Pound, Roar and Slam Jump attacks are bone-grinding. Our party uses nonstop suppressive fire (don't worry, nano-ammo means you never run out of bullets) to back the Hybrid beast into a corner along the sparkling parallax-mapped walls of the Centone Mines.

"...sporting the detailed textures, long-view distances, big particle effects and densely armored normal-mapped characters that players loved in other Unreal Engine 3 shooters...."

Artists [illegible]
Huxley artists and modelers toil away on character and vehicle design. Spot that issue of *Girls of Gaming* in the background?



[illegible] engineering
Audio engineers are busy integrating Kevin Riepl's orchestral sound track into Huxley's impressive CG cinematics.

Classic [illegible]
An inside look at Webzen's extensive plans for Huxley's vast weapon selection and equipment customizability.

"My favorite directors are Tarantino and Rodriguez, but if you were to look at Huxley as a film it would probably be more like a sci-fi blockbuster than *Grindhouse*."

License to kill

Multipersonnel vehicles and aircraft will feature heavily in Huxley's large-scale battle modes, and like all of the game's RPG elements, vehicles can be upgraded, too. By around level 15, you begin to really open up Huxley's vehicle skill and weapon categories. A player that has invested heavily in their character's License level will have more offensive options, increased speed and more durability using the same vehicle as a less experienced driver. Since a rampaging full-tilt vehicle and ace driver could be a force of nature, opponents will see an icon over the vehicle indicating "Master Driver"—a signal to run away and call for backup. For fellow team members, that icon is like a lighthouse piercing through the fog of war, a potential safe haven on wheels.

Tanks can be upgraded up to five times and rigged with 10 possible types of weapons.

moderately powerful PC. A recent dual-core CPU, 2 gigs of RAM and an 8800 GT video card might be the ideal entry point for next-gen image quality and solid frame rates.

"It's a great engine. Great tools, too, because it's been commercialized for so long," Kang observes. "When we were designing Huxley's levels, we kept referencing the Unreal or Quake style of hyper-action gameplay, but we needed a more natural architecture and atmosphere instead of the boxier, sports-arena-like maps in those games. Although we almost had to completely rebuild the engine's MMO modules, especially the network part, it's been a strong and flexible engine to realize our plans."

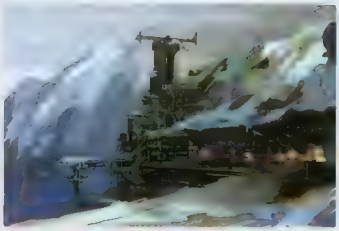
Now, about that Xbox 360 version...

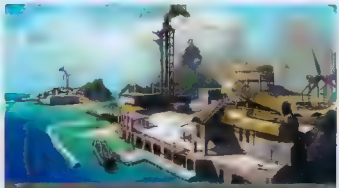
Webzen reps have been aloof about the console version's status. However, that doesn't affect Kang. He's still making Huxley for 360, and it's running very well on console: "In an overall sense, the 360 is just as good or better than a high-spec PC, except for small available memory. It's a well designed, uniform architecture, has a strong GPU, good for this engine. Due to the low memory, Huxley will probably be 720p on Xbox, but it will move *very* well."

The 360 Huxley, played on Xbox Live servers hosting up to 3,000 people, will feature a different story with unique missions, but will be set in the same universe and with several overlapping characters. I tell Kang that one of his testers pointed out an important white-haired sergeant character—possibly one of those key figures in both versions? "Yes, he's an important neutral character in the overall story line. When players see him in the 360 version, he'll have a robotic arm that's revealed. This guy is neither Sapien nor Alternative. There's a terrorist sect in the story line called the HLO—the Hybrid Liberation Organization. He belongs to that faction. As an Xbox-version player, when this NPC is with you, it's in the past and you're

[illegible]
reach the front lines of remote military operations.

Fragging by the dock of the bay
As evidenced by the striking visuals of the Harbor battle zone, Earth lies in ruin. The rocky landscape and ancient riverboat husks that dominate this dried-up seabed provide multiple ambush points between high-traffic areas dotted with attack and armor power-ups.





Lunarites are a precious commodity. While fragments can be found across the planet, there are highly coveted, rich-density regions like this ice cave (top) and tropical island.

playing a terrorist hero. So the character will be younger, in a timeline 20 years earlier. That same character will be seen as a hero from the past in the PC version."

In the end, all the missions of the PC version will be included in the console Huxley, while many of the 360's aforementioned unique missions will be added to the PC game around the launch of the console version. There's more to this timing than generosity. Through several PVE and PVP missions, Webzen will cleverly introduce the PC-to-Xbox-360 cross-platform gameplay you've often seen mentioned, simultaneously connecting players and Huxley's past and present narrative. As always, postapocalyptic themes of scarce resources, precious Lunarites and Hybrid repression serve as motivation for the Alts and Sapiens to ventilate each other across these PC-360 battlefields. While there are cross-platform co-op elements as well, it's hard to imagine how Xbox 360 players will avoid crushing defeat at the fingertips of mouse and keyboard players in PVP. Maybe that's one for the leaderboards to substantiate.

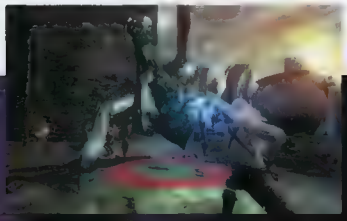
The genre buster

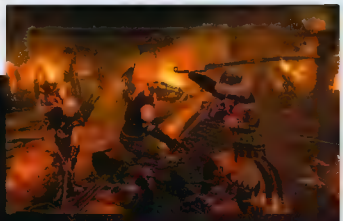
When it comes to Huxley, my central premise has always been this: It's an MMO for the FPS crowd, not a FPS for the MMO crowd. This isn't some half-rigged action shooter system like in Tabula Rasa; the speed and timing in Huxley is Unreal Tournament grade and will surely appeal to UT players. At the same time, fans of powerful class distinction (Team Fortress 2), vehicles and strategic load-out management (Battlefield, Enemy Territory) will undoubtedly enjoy Huxley's three professions and deep character customization. RPG and co-op fans will find story and character development in intimate quest parties, socializing en masse in stunning capital cities, while chronic PVP devastators will enjoy the varied modes and potentially massive numbers in stylish battle zones. Merwyn wasn't able to reunite the Sapiens and Alternatives, but perhaps Huxley can bring MMO and FPS players together.

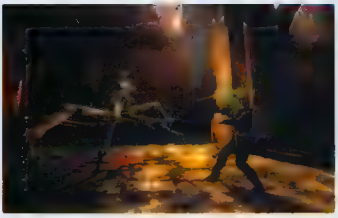
Available for purchase from level 11 onward with the appropriate license, this Hoverbike Pistol—rated at about twice the speed of run-boost—makes it a pleasure to tear across town.

System: PC | **Developer:** CD Projekt RED | **Publisher:** Atari | **Multi:** SP only | **ESRB:** M | **Available:** September

review







The Witcher
Enhanced Edition

No demon or plague can stop him

words Mike Griffin

"...think of The Witcher as a film with a very spicy script that you wouldn't want little kids to overhear..."

A [illegible] witcher accepts a contract requiring him to banish arisen fiends from a cemetery by moonlight. It's part of the job description. Geralt is a veteran witcher-for-hire, a traveling salesman dealing death on the edge of his blade. He checks in and out of corrupted cemeteries like cheap motels, slaying the night for a low fee. Last year, novelist Andrzej Sapkowski's world of The Witcher manifested in computer-game form via new developer on the block CD Projekt RED. Geralt's journey was almost universally praised, yet CD Projekt did not lay down. They released massive post-release patches that contained numerous improvements and all-new quests. The ultimate compilation of this extra effort has arrived in The Witcher: Enhanced Edition, the rarefied [illegible] vision of the game, featuring bug fixes, optimizations, better combat, new quests and an adventure editor to craft your own campaigns.

The two changes with the most [illegible] impact in the Enhanced Edition are faster loading times and improved combat timing. The BioWare Aurora engine inherently has a lot of loading due to its modular nature. The Enhanced Edition has dramatically reduced the delay when entering buildings, an especially welcome upgrade when Geralt is on investigation-type missions, like those in the sprawling medieval town of Vizima, where you'll be chatting up loads of NPCs (with over 5,000 lines of rewritten and rerecorded dialogue—it shows) in a dozen different locations.

The combat hasn't seen a wholesale change, but it flows much better, and this greatly enhances one's enjoyment of the game's huge skill tree and mo-capped attack moves. Combos in the three attack styles (power, fast and group) roll out in more fluid sequences, and integrating magic attacks into melee flourishes has been finely tuned. It's also easier to execute the bloody finishing moves. I'll advise one supreme pro tip when it comes to combat in The Witcher: Whenever you're facing more than three mobile enemies, put Geralt's back against the nearest wall (not a corner; a wall with space to the left and right). Your group-style attacks will be very effective against the surrounding AI jostling for position. I'd also recommend investing points in the stun and knockdown effects of your Wind magic. A stunned enemy is a decapitated enemy.

Feared and prejudged by most peasants, main character Geralt—like all seasoned witchers—abandoned his humanity long ago through intense torture training and mutating poisons and fungi. He became a monster-slaying machine. Throughout The Witcher, there's a deep subgame of alchemy and potion-making, concoctions that bestow superhuman skills and boost reflexes, vitality and speed. In addition to interface tweaks like inventory auto-sorting buttons (Thank you!), the Enhanced Edition has appreciably streamlined the entire potion-brewing process, making alchemy a great deal more agreeable. This time around, I had Geralt blitzed on fungus juice for most of the game.

True to its Mature rating, you can think of The Witcher as a film with a very spicy script that you wouldn't want little kids to overhear, since it would provide them with loads of vulgar material to run with. There are no cheesy renaissance-faire-like soliloquies to endure here, and this intricate, fully-voiced story line transcends some of The Witcher's clumsiness in other areas. The two new adventures, short but sweet at around five hours, also have full VO.

This is a good-looking world in high-detail modes, filled with normal-mapped characters, swaying flora, convincing weather, faraway vistas and painstakingly detailed crypts and dungeons. The Enhanced Edition runs smoother and has more animation. NPCs will now fidget, look at speakers and have improved emotional states. Finally, for budding RPG makers, the D'Jinni Adventure Editor is included in the Enhanced Edition and there's already an active community of mod-makers who can provide guidance. If you're not one of the 800,000-plus people already enjoying The Witcher, this Enhanced Edition should be all the motivation you need.

parting shot

Clearly one of the better RPG releases on PC in recent years, here's The Witcher with better writing, many improved VO performances, superior combat, upgraded presentation and hours of bonus content. The Enhanced Edition also comes in a fancy box with a lot of extras.

Ask Alienware

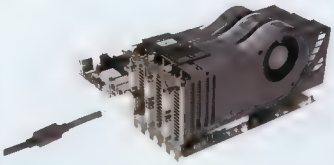
027 | 10_08

In our October edition, we explore overclocking from within the operating system, the range of scaling performance in dual, triple and quad GPU architectures and the not-so-crazy idea of saving the planet with solar-powered laptops.

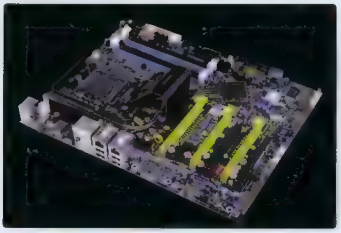
Q: I have an older system, an X2 4800 dual core with a GeForce 8800 GT. I'm right on the "recommended spec" for most new games, but I'm having trouble maxing them out and holding a steady FPS. I'd like to gently overclock my system, squeeze a couple of hundred extra MHz out of the processor and video card. Nothing too dramatic. Is there a simple way, in Windows, for me to safely increase my CPU and GPU clock speed by just a few percent each, without diving into voltages, etc.? I think I can ride out this old rig for a few more months, just need to give it a jump-start.
Trevor, MD

Alienware: Unfortunately, the short answer is no, because overclocking through Windows typically requires software specific to your motherboard as opposed to a "one size fits all" program. At Alienware, we do all our CPU overclocking through the system's BIOS, and that does require voltage modifications. As far as the GPU goes, there are some utilities, such as Nvidia Coolbits, that work through Windows and allow you to overclock right in the driver.

Q: How much baseline improvement do you get when going from dual video cards to three and four video cards? I understand that regardless of the game's driver support, the SLI/CrossFire technology will provide a basic performance increase, right? Also, do you think triple and quad cards are the future, or will it be single cards with several smaller GPU cores on the same card?
Pete, NY



Alienware: Because so many other system variables contribute to game performance, there is not a direct formula you can follow that says one GPU delivers X performance while two processors deliver 2X, three processors 3X, and so on. Scaling can vary dramatically from changing your resolution from 1440x900 to 2560x1600, for example. Obviously, however, increasing the number of GPUs as well as the amount of graphics memory will give you a noticeable increase in performance. Multicard graphics configurations are still the norm, though both SLI and CrossFireX take advantage of multicore cards. As this is also the trend with CPUs, there's no reason to expect graphics to remain limited to only one or two cores on a single card.



"...we do all our CPU overclocking through the system's BIOS, and that does require voltage modifications"

Q: Do you have any green power-saving concept designs in R&D that we might see sometime in the future in Alienware systems? For example, I was thinking laptop manufacturers should put light-sensitive panels on the back of their notebooks. They would act like solar panels and create additional energy. Like "hybrid" notebooks! Good idea? Or do you think we'll be stuffing landfills with batteries for years to come?
Dashawn, TX

Alienware: Solar-powered notebooks are a great idea. Currently, new research is being conducted on many different types of energy sources, primarily in the area of new battery technologies. As far as Alienware computers go, we are always trying new ways to make our systems both more energy efficient and environmentally friendly. That's why all Alienware computers comply with strict RoHS standards. This initiative restricts the use of many hazardous materials often found in electronics manufacturing. Customers can also participate in the AlienExchange trade-in program which allows you to send in old electronics and receive credit towards a new Alienware system.

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.

Parabellum
Painting the town red

There are plenty of online FPS games available now, but few can be experienced in the manner of Unreal Engine 3-powered titles like Huxley and the game you see here, Parabellum. Our first contact with Acony Games' Parabellum was in early '07, noteworthy in part for its semi-controversial New York City nuclear-terrorist scenario, but mostly because the sprawling Enemy Territory-like campaigns across a massive urban playground (complete with building destructibility) looked bloody awesome. K2 Network, best known for its Sword of the New World fantasy MMO, will bring Parabellum to the multiplayer masses by year's end.

Much has changed in Parabellum since its initial public display, not the least of which is the balance in its Delta Force-versus-Terrorist city campaigns. "From early on, we were looking for symmetric balance," Acony cofounder Andre Herbst told Play. "Asymmetric balance works well if you have more than two factions, like in Warcraft 3, with four asymmetrical balanced factions that work very well. Since we have only Delta and Terrorist, an asymmetric balance could go critical if players find a way to exploit the asymmetry. Since Parabellum is designed for online competition, we can't afford such a risk. What we're looking for is minor differences in equipment and a balanced but differentiable character design."

Parabellum isn't doing "maps" in the traditional online FPS sense. Acony has created city campaigns. Each campaign represents a large area of New York City—much larger than typical online shooter maps. Teams have to choose their path through the campaigns, making decisions like, "Should we go through the park, fight through the streets or take the subway?" All this should reflect the players' choice of equipment and their combat tactics. In a park and on the street, they're more likely to encounter enemy snipers than in the subway systems or industrial areas. Acony wants real-world military strategies to apply in Parabellum because of the open-campaign system. They want you to prepare ambushes and lure enemies into traps, flank fortified positions, and take away advantageous terrain. Unlike Enemy Territory, there is no linear path. "You can choose any path to fight your way through the city," Herbst explains. "The difference is that you can pick your battles and choice really matters—there are 50 to 100 objectives per campaign, each with rewards."

Your soldier in Parabellum is designed to be a versatile urban fighting machine. There are more than 100 possible ways to equip a character. In addition to different armor types and handy ancillary firepower like drum grenades, each weapon is customizable up to 10 times, with different attachments, modifiers, ammunition types, high-capacity magazines and other goodies. For fans of class definition, Parabellum's dozens of load-outs often fit the archetypes: An assassin-type player might choose a commando knife, a pistol and two clips. A fan of heavies would outfit special body armor, a helmet, a heavy assault rifle and one or two extra drum magazines—each with 90 rounds, and maybe two or three grenades for good measure. Every item (every bullet) has weight, so the difference in speed and agility is an ever present consideration.

As you can see, Parabellum has undergone a serious graphical face-lift. Acony reworked all character animation via motion-captured performances; they enhanced the view distance, the scale of buildings, and the motion, sound and AI of the city. The team had to "rethink the entire artistic side of the game," says Herbst, to give players a sense of the scale and feel of New York. It was all greatly assisted by the flexible Unreal Engine 3, allowing Acony's programmers to focus on Parabellum-specific gameplay code 90 percent of the time. In turn, Acony has extended the engine's destructibility system and plugged in their unique multiplayer campaign code. As for the sound design of Parabellum, "If you're blasting Parabellum in your room, the neighbors will call the cops in a minute," Herbst half-jokes. "But we'll spend most of the remaining time improving firefights to sound brutal and destructive, that's what we really want."

There's much more to uncover in Parabellum, and we hope to do so very soon.

"Acony reworked all character animation via motion-captured performances"

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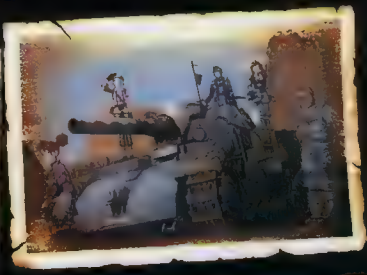

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Top 10 Anime That Go

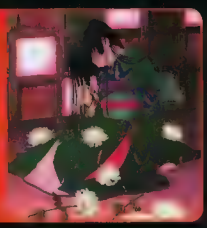
Bump in the Night

2008 Spooktacular

words from beyond Dave Halverson

Hell Girl

The Hook: Damn your enemy's hell. Hellcorespondence.com at your service...



Gilgamesh

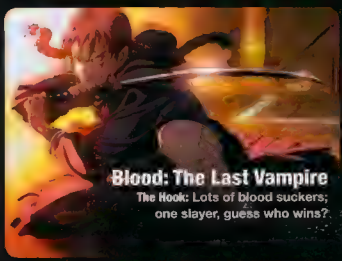
The Hook: Is humanity worth saving? Which side will you choose?

Elfen Lied

The Hook: Vicious killing machines in "sheep's" clothing.

Master of Mosquiton

The Hook: Strictly frisky business; and possibly the weirdest love triangle ever.

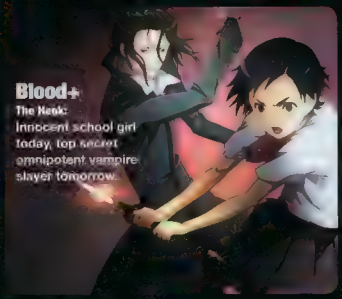


Blood: The Last Vampire

The Hook: Lots of blood suckers; one slayer, guess who wins?

Blood+

The Hook: Innocent school girl today, top secret omnipotent vampire slayer tomorrow.



Hellsing

The Hook: Vampires decide we're what's for dinner. Hellsing to the rescue!

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"It isn't often that I get the chance to go into a film cold with no expectations or a clue as to its origin"

Dead Space: Downfall

In space no one can hear your guts being devoured

words Dave Halverson

I've just watched an extraordinary 75 minutes of animation (although witnessed is probably a better choice of words). It isn't often that I get the chance to go into a film cold with no expectations or a clue about its origin—especially when it's something as high-profile as the animated prequel to Dead Space, EA's new, first-ever, survival horror franchise; the first of several Starz Media/Film Roman/Anchor Bay films based on EA games. If they're all as good as this, we're in for some epic game-related animation.

It usually takes me all of a minute or two to determine a show's origin but *Downfall* had me guessing until the credits rolled. The character designs have a western flavor, but also the type of subtle exaggeration and distinct silhouettes Japanese animators use to establish a bond with the audience.There's no substitute for great technique. They dodge the CGI bullet too, using it only when necessary to avoid that patchy look... That's a big one.

Not that there aren't any hiccups in *Dead Space*. It has an inconsistency or two, although nothing immediately evident; our perfectly pitched protagonist Security Officer Alissa Vincent has a few walking clichés in her unit, and it borrows enough from *Alien* and *Aliens* to qualify for a payment plan (although in their defense, in this setting it would be hard not to).

What you have to realize though—and I'm not giving anything away by saying so—is that *Dead Space: Downfall* is a straight-up pick-off fest, which makes the fact that the story is compelling and the dialogue near impeccable, pretty miraculous. The reason I consider it extraordinary and allude to witnessing it rather than just watching isn't because it's a bloodbath, which it is (along with guts too); it's because the tension and the horror is palpable. That's hard to do with a cartoon. And although your experience may vary depending on how seriously you take your animation, I actually cared about the characters, especially Alissa. I only hope the game can live up.

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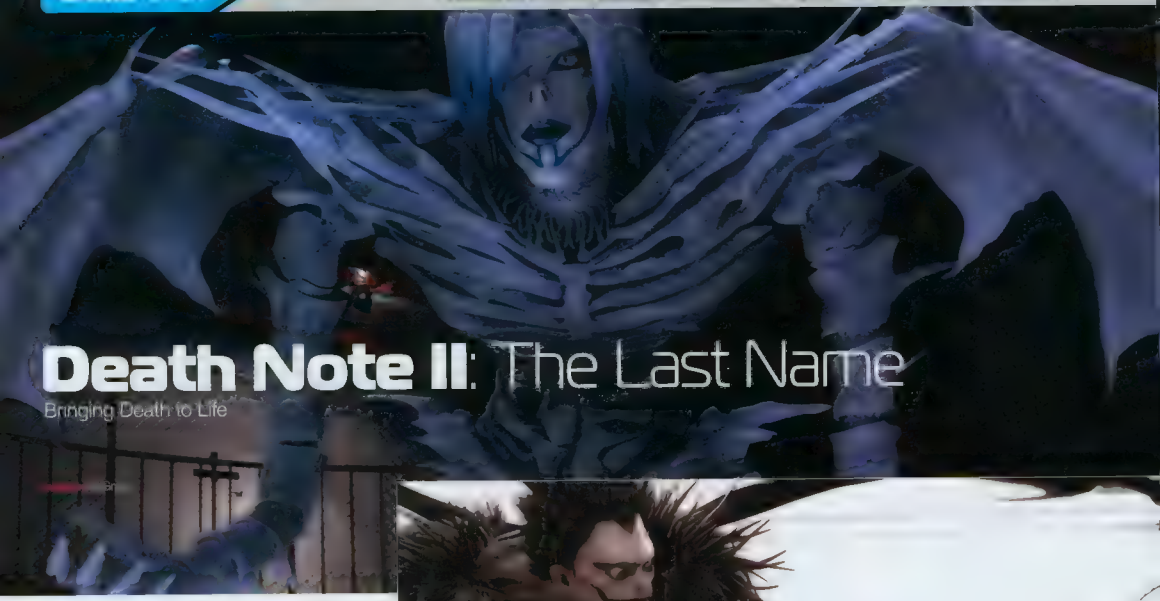


Death Note II: The Last Name

Bringing Death to Life

Absolute power corrupts absolutely." - Lord Acton

Chances are, if you've picked up this magazine and read this far into it, you have at least a passing familiarity with *Death Note*, Viz's manga sensation that just concluded its 12-volume run. But most likely, you're not an anime fan and just put up with this little section because you're trying to get to Dave's, Heather's or Brady's back-of-the-book on gaming or whatever. Wait! Before you turn the page, hear me out—*Death Note* is really, really good.

Death Note, as my nifty subhead points out, is all about power, justice and the thin, blurry line between the two. It's also a crackerjack detective story with a driving, serpentine plot and a suitably ambiguous, though satisfying, resolution. For the full impact of *Death Note*, the manga remains a must. But for the uninitiated (or those with short attention spans), Viz released two live-action movies that compress the sprawling story admirably, trading depth for plot action.

The first movie, released in May, roughly covers the first nine volumes of the manga. The story twists the detective genre, focusing not on the hero but the villain: high-schooler Light Yagami. One day, Light finds a black book with "Death Note" on the cover, and obtains the power to kill anyone instantly just by knowing their name and face. He decides to use his powers to enforce justice, shuffling murderers, rapists and other riffraff off their mortal coils. The rest of the world, though, doesn't see Light's actions as benevolent justice. Instead, the media dub him "Kira" (as in "Killer") and the world's greatest detective, L (as in the letter), is called to expose and capture Kira/Light.

The second movie, in theaters this month, resolves the cat-and-mouse game between Kira and L. L has closed in on Light, whom he strongly suspects of being Kira. Light, meanwhile, wants to get close enough to L to discover his name and destroy the last threat to his power as Kira. Complicating matters, a second Kira surfaces, one with seemingly greater abilities than the first Kira. You'll find your head spinning as Kira and L, two masters of deduction, match wits with their lives on the line.

Maybe you're not an anime or manga fan. See these movies anyway. Maybe you don't even know what the terms "anime" and "manga" mean. See these movies anyway. Maybe you love shows like *The Bachelor* and truly, deeply believe that Paula Abdul is a fantastic judge of singing talent and fashion. In that case, put this magazine down and walk briskly away—we don't want you here, anyway. Everyone left, pick up the first movie and watch it in time for *Death Note II: The Last Name*'s release.

manga review

Released by [illegible] Author [illegible]
Volume [illegible] Length: [illegible] Available: [illegible]

Gankutsuou
The Count of Monte Cristo
Almost the Full Monte

Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo, Gonzo's anime retelling of Dumas' page-turner, blew us away with its fantastic visual effects and gripping story in 2007. We've waited almost two years for the manga treatment, but thus far there's not much to get excited about.

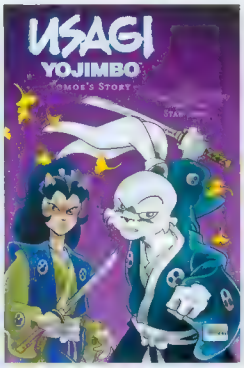
Storywise, it's almost an exact parallel. Set far in the future, *Gankutsuou* tells the story of two young aristocrats, Franz and Albert, visiting Luna for their first Carnival. There, they meet the eponymous Count, whose generosity conceals a darker motive—revenge against his betrayers.

Manga *Gankutsuou*, though it represents the original well, lacks much of the amazing visual style that made the show a standout because of its medium. Without its eye-popping animation, you're left with a decent, not great, adaptation of an outstanding anime. **Bill Gray**

manga review

Released by [illegible] Author [illegible]
Volume [illegible] Length: [illegible] Available: [illegible]

Usagi Yojimbo
Tomoe's Story
Follow the White Rabbit



Ok, full disclosure time: Until now, I had only heard of *Usagi Yojimbo*, Stan Sakai's furry homage to Miyamoto Musashi, from a brief appearance on the *TMNT* cartoon show. So, I was prepared to evaluate the comic book along the same lines as something funny, light, and childish. How deep could a story about anthropomorphic rabbits, cats, and pandas be?

It's great to be wrong sometimes. Drawing extensively from Japanese myths, history, culture, and traditions, *Usagi Yojimbo* is a Japan-o-phile's dream. This volume collects stories about Usagi's principal love interest, Tomoe, a female samurai. Particularly poignant is "Cha-no-yu," a highly accurate portrayal of Japanese tea ceremony, and a brilliant study in restraint and understatement. Now I've got to get the previous volumes to read what I've been missing. **Bill Gray**

The Shop

Microsoft Sidewinder X6 gaming keyboard

The Sidewinder X6 is a slick multi-programmable backlit gaming keyboard. The X6's numerical pad is actually detachable; it can go on the right as usual, or you can move it to the left side of the keyboard for an impressive 90-entry macro pad. The docking system uses magnets, simultaneously gee-whiz cool and very easy to securely attach. Besides this novelty, the Sidewinder X6 is all business: a sturdy build, media keys, profile switching, and jog dials for backlighting luminescence and volume. You won't find USB or mic/headphone ports here, but that's rarely a dealmaker with gaming keyboards. You need quality, customization and programmability. That's the Sidewinder X6.

Microsoft Sidewinder X5 gaming mouse

The new Sidewinder X5 rectifies our minor qualms with the first model: the unnecessary weight system and swappable feet are gone. The X5 feels carefully weighted and its feet move better than any of the options in the original. We miss the original's metallic mouse wheel and thumb buttons, but the X5's rubber wheel has very nice click and resistance, while its two plastic thumb buttons feel like they can take a beating. The X5 retains its predecessor's excellent 2000dpi laser engine and full programmability. Ultimately you're looking at the Lite edition of the original Sidewinder, and this price-reduced rebirth still belongs among the top tier of right-handed gaming mice.

Razer Salmosa gaming mouse

Razer's slick little ambidextrous Salmosa is pitched as the "quickest entry level gaming-grade mouse" available, and its 1800dpi infrared sensor is currently the fastest optical technology of its kind. It features the 1MS response time, wide 16-bit data path, and slick Teflon feet of its larger brethren. We do wish Razer had chosen to include at least one side button on the Salmosa, as even entry level gamers can make use of that.

iSound Back Up Battery 2-in-1

It's official: the iPhone is nothing less than perfection. No one will argue that. Oh wait, that new 3G reception thing is giving plenty of owners major headaches, and depending on your perspective, the battery life is at the very least in need of a little help. Or a lot of help, truth be told. One very capable option is this back-up battery 2-in-1 called iSound (also great for iPods.) Simple stuff: when you need extended battery life, simply snap it into the iPhone and get another full cycle of power. Nothing too complicated for the 50 dollar price tag: you've got a retractable USB charging cable, AC adapter, and the battery for those moments you need more juice. It's a little cumbersome having a bulky extension powering your device when you're using your iPhone as an actual phone, but more than welcome.

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Comics

Gears of War
Bleeds onto the Panelled Page

words [illegible]

With Master Chief taking the holiday season off, Microsoft's other exclusive sci-fi shooter juggernaut is stepping in to steal the alien-thwarting thunder; Cliff Bleszinki's baby is back, and like any five-million-and-counting selling franchise *Gears of War* isn't content to only conquer the console world. Like *Halo* before it, *Gears* has been pounding its stamp on t-shirts and toys, and Fenix's fans have been obliged to eat it up like a Brumak feasting on flesh. Happily counting ourselves among the Horde-haters, mini Marcus's—taking on equally diminutive Locust Drones—adorn our desks (thanks, NECA Toys!) and our apparel proudly sports bloody COG symbols; all our *Gears*-worshipping bases were covered, save for scoring the scoop on the upcoming comic book adaptation. But, like any determined DELTA Squad member, we quickly righted this wrong and spoke to the series' scribe (who also just happened to write the new game's story) Joshua Ortega.

With some help from Epic, DC Comics, Microsoft, and artist Liam Sharp—check out his eye-pleasing panels on this page—Ortega is further fleshing out the chainsaw-to-jugular action. Taking place during a six month period between *Gears 1* and 2, the monthly series—landing in October—digs deeper than the interactive medium allows, offering fans a closer peek at the lives of the DELTA and SIGMA squad hunks, and even introducing rookie recruit Jace Stratton to *Gears* gritty and gory world. With our fans' cancers trained between his eyes, Ortega spilled [illegible] the background, creative process, and involvement in *Gears*' upcoming big-screen bow.

PLAY: Could you talk a bit about your background in comics, novels and games, and how it led to you working on *Gears of War 2*?
Josh Ortega: I started out with journalism, mostly music and entertainment and then wrote a novel (FREQUENCIES), and did a 40-city book tour for it in 2003. That led to gigs at Marvel, DC, Top Cow, Dark Horse and other comic book publishers. Then the comics led to the video games. It's great to be able work in various media. Each one has its own magic.

Can you tell us a bit about your role in penning the game's story? What's the process like?
JO: It's a combo of writing to the technology and the gameplay, while also making sure to tell a compelling and emotionally resonant story. It can be a tough balance at times, but I think we've done it with *Gears 2*.

What sort of mediums in pop culture influences your storytelling? Any specific favorite inspirations?
JO: A lot of different things, but I think we've always tried to make sure that it's a good combo of smart sci-fi, gritty war and action. Cliff Bleszinski, the design director, has always had a powerful vision for the game and universe, and we've all made sure that the new stuff we create keeps with that vision.

Have you been approached at all to participate in any way on the upcoming film adaptation?
JO: I've already had a chance to meet with director Len Wiseman and writer Chris Morgan. Both are great guys and talented artists who are excited about *Gears* and ready to make an amazing film. Cliff and Rod Fergusson (Epic Games Senior Producer) have been the most involved with the film, but I've definitely been informed all along the way so we can make sure to coordinate everything properly. The *Gears* universe is an amazing place and we're excited that it'll be expanding by leaps and bounds this year! Stick around; we've got some amazing surprises in store. This year's just the beginning.

"Cliff Bleszinski, the design director, has always had a powerful vision for the game and universe..."

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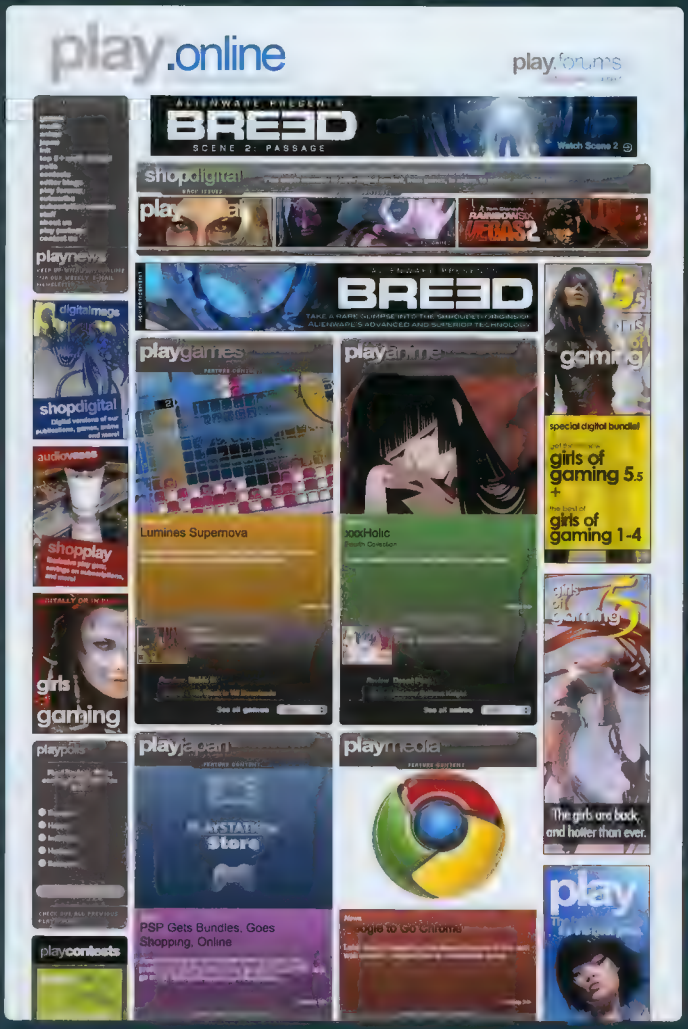

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BACK OF THE BOOK

GAMING FOR GIRLS

Or, I hope to Never Mention That I'm A Girl Gamer Ever Again

"Girls can play Soul Calibur IV or Street Fighter IV right next to boys -- fact is, I do. And I'm never playing it as a female-playing-a-fighting-game, I'm playing it as a gamer."

Last month, I received an email from Reverb Communications. Like the press releases that came the month before from Paramount (regarding the upcoming female-focused video games Pretty in Pink, Clueless, and Mean Girls), it was addressed to me not as an editor of Play Magazine, but as a *female* editor of Play Magazine.
Reverb thought I might be interested in the following games:

• My Make Up: - Pamper and make-over your personalized avatars and those of your friends. Players can host makeover and face painting parties, share photo albums with friends, and chat about the latest techniques and trends in make-up

• My Dress Up: Practice your fashion creativity by dressing up your own personal avatars in this one of a kind dress-up simulation videogame. Players can host dress-up parties, share photo albums and trade fashion secrets, styles and trends with friends.

• My Secret Diary: Explore your top-secret feelings, gab about crushes and gossip about friends, using your very own password protected journal. Players can test themselves and their closest friends with a number of personality quizzes, keep track of their busy social lives with a personal secret calendar and discover what's next with the game's Fortune Cookie and Crystal Ball features.

Let's get right to it, gang. I find this material sexist, insulting, and hopelessly antique. It's a more destructive than the large-breasted heroines of Dead or Alive, or the hot-pants wearing Lara Croft. See, the thing is, games may be played by boys, but they're not made *for* boys. Games are made for gamers, and both women and men can enjoy them. It could be argued that games like My Make Up suggest that the titles we're currently playing are being developed for men. And sure, the content of many titles is sophomoric and sexualized, but I would argue that seeing a virtual woman in a short skirt fighting on equal footing with a shirtless six-packed samurai contains some positive elements for female self-image. Girls can play Soul Calibur IV or Street Fighter IV right next to boys -- fact is, I do. And I'm never playing it as a female-playing-a-fighting-game, I'm playing it as a gamer.

To be honest, I'm ashamed of self-righteous "grrrrl gamers" who invoke their genders in their reviews. Video games are played with your hands, not with your genitals (unless we're talking about, uhh, REZ). It's one thing to mention that Ryu is a hottie; after all, many male gamers would offer up similar opinions of Chun Li. It's another thing all together to complain about panty shots and huge breasts in a game that features shirtless men with equally impossible physiques. Do we get angry at the Ancient Greeks for idealizing the human form? Should we be attacking modern, virtual sculptors for carving similar figures out of polygons?

The games that feature these impossibly-shaped women are works of fantasy which usually star equally sexualized male figures. It's pretty easy to argue that Reverb's trilogy of girl-focused games are grounded in a more immediate reality. Additionally, though I'm not well versed in feminist text (and am bit worried that I'm going to swallow my words after we get next month's letters to the editor), it seems like both sexes are being targeted (and embarrassed) by these idealized figures. Nobody dude exits a bout of Soul Caliber and thinks, "Man, if I was standing next to Mitsurugi, I'd probably do pretty well for myself."

Getting back to the point at hand -- My Dress Up, My Secret Diary, and My Make-Up are not only targeted to girls, they're targeted at young girls, and reinforce secondary self-esteem issues that these girls are bombarded with every day. I'm sure there's an argument to be made that girls who play Dead or Alive don't wrap up a match thinking, "I should get breast implants." On the other hand, children exposed to My Make Up may develop more immediate insecurities and purchase make-over kits as soon as they're able. But I guess my final thought on this is ... well, girls don't need girl-centric, isolating games. Girls are *already* gaming -- they make up almost fifty percent of the market without Secret Diaries and Make Up software. I'd rather see more girls playing Geometry Wars, and increasing their hand-eye coordination skills, than opting for Fashion software because of peer (and market) pressures. Don't get me wrong -- I wear make-up every day, and am not suggesting that it should be done away with all together. But do we really need virtual make-up invading our gaming space?

Whew. With that, I'm going back to be a gamer, enjoying some video-game playing. I'll be on the other side of the Street Fighter IV cabinet. You know, you can't even tell I'm a girl from your side ... and that gender-blindness might be part of what's great about games.

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